COOKE

William Dean Howells as a Literary Theorist

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WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS AS A LITERARY THEORIST

BY

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I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY

Delmar Gross Cooke

ENTITLED William Dean Howells As A Literary Theorist

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Committee
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WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS
AS A
LITERARY THEORIST

I. HOWELLS THE MAN

The present study aims to follow Mr. Howells along a single track through the very wide domain of his criticism. Yet it will be strange if we do not find ourselves led here and there from the paths of literary theory into the expansive fields of his philosophy of life. For it is indeed as master in this larger realm that he has been accorded his title, Dean of American Letters. It may even be questioned whether any modern master, save Tolstoi himself, has insisted upon so complete a fusion of the ideals of literature with the ideals of life. Literature is life; life, literature: in no less lofty and inspiring a creed have the years of maturity confirmed the Dean of American Letters. This is what he had in mind when he entitled one of the later collections Literature and Life. "If I did not find life in what professed to be literature," he explains in the foreword to that volume, "I disabled its profession, and possibly from this habit, now inveterate with me, I am never quite sure of life unless I find literature in it."

One must be careful to say that the years of maturity confirmed him in this creed, for all the autobiographical documents, especially the intimate and indispensable Literary Passions, are clear records of a growth from literature into life, from books into the world from which books are made. This development, therefore,

will be the dominant note in our account of Howells the Man. In this life, one of singular devotion to letters - unwavering, unreserved devotion, almost from the cradle,- we shall see him born of a reading race, nourished on printers' ink, exulting in the very smell of paper, obsessed by the printed page, gradually awakening to a truer literary sense. We shall see him climb down from the "very high aesthetic horse" which he confesses having ridden, draw near to humanity, and learn "to see books from without the library." We shall observe him emerge from the eighteenth century, his idol, Pope, crumbling in the dust, close his Thackeray; open his Tolstoi.

HIS ANCESTRY AND EARLY ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Howells' great-grandmother once wrote to a daughter, upon some occasion of willfulness, that she had "planted a dagger in her mother's heart," which leads him to believe that his ancestress was not unacquainted with the romances of her day. It was from her, he thinks, that his grandfather inherited a love of poetry, rather than from the great-grandfather, who, although a Friend by Convincement, must have had a somewhat worldly turn of mind, since he accumulated a fortune in the manufacture of flannels which industry he founded in the pretty little Welsh town called The Hay, on the river Wye, and even made a prospecting trip to America.

The Grandfather Howells sailed for Boston in 1808, and, after peregrinations extending over New York, Virginia, and Ohio, with experiments in woolen milling and farming, settled in Hamilton Ohio, as proprietor of a drug and book store, the only book store

in the place. He was a Methodist, and, says his grandson, "kept his affection for certain poets of the graver, not to say, gloomier sort."

Religion and poetry were both more pervading influences in the life of William Cooper Howells, the father of William Dean. He suffered a season of skepticism, during which he vainly endeavored to get himself converted at camp meetings, finally espousing the doctrines of Swedenborg; and in that faith the children were carefully reared. It was an influence that dignified the home life, for there was nothing of fanaticism or of dogmatism in the elder Howells. He "despised austerity as something owlish" and "loved a joke almost as much as he loved a truth." It did, however, cut the family off from church going, their Sundays being enlivened only by occasional visits of ministers and by readings from the Book of Worship and the Heavenly Arcana. The children had their "unwholesome spiritual pride in being different from their fellows in religion, but, on the other hand, it taught them not to fear being different from others if they believed themselves right."

William Dean Howells was born on March 1, 1837, at Martin's Ferry, Ohio. Three years later the family moved to Hamilton, the "Boy's Town," where the father took charge of the "Intelligencer," Hamilton's whig newspaper. He was a staunch Henry Clay Whig or constitutional anti-slavery man. Hamilton, however, was overwhelmingly democratic, and the Howells family did not enjoy any decided change in fortune. They remained as always, poor, but never in actual want.

The boy was particularly fortunate in his home life. His

mother, Mary Dean Howells, although she suffered on account of her housewifely instincts, often failing to view the crudities of their material surroundings in a poetic light, "was always the best and tenderest mother, and her love had the heavenly art of making each child feel itself the most important, while she was partial to none."[1]

The dominant influence in forming his ideas, however, was his association with his father. They were the most congenial of companions, discussing literature and philosophy together as they went about their work. And although they differed in some matters of taste, the main traits are notably similar in father and son, the tendency to moralizing and philosophizing, always tempered by a fine strain of humor, the love of nature, even of the most common things in nature, and the sense of personal sympathy with men, even with the most common men. The son writes of his father:[2]

"There was that in him which appealed to the better qualities of those he came in contact with, and made them wish to be as good as he thought them capable of being. He was not a poet in the artistic sense, but he was a poet in his view of life, the universe, creation, and his dream of it included man, as well as the woods and fields and their citizenship. His first emotion concerning every form of life was sympathetic; he wished to get upon common ground with every person and with every thing.

"But he had the philosophic rather than the imaginative

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[1] A Boy's Town

[2] Introduction to W. C. H.'s Life in Ohio

temperament, and what he sometimes thought he wished to do in literature and art (for he used, when young, to write verse and to draw), he would probably not have done if he had enjoyed all those opportunities and advantages which circumstances denied him."

At the age of ten, William Ddan went to work in the printing office. "This was not altogether because he was needed there, I dare say, but because it was part of his father's Swedenborgian philosophy that everyone should fulfill a use; I do not know that when the boy wanted to go swimming, or hunting, or skating, it consoled him much to reflect that the angels in the highest heaven delighted in uses; nevertheless, it was good for him to be of use, though maybe not so much use."[1]

In 1849 the family moved to Dayton, where the father had bought out the "Transcript." This enterprise proved a total failur and in the fall of the following year occured another removal, this time to a log-cabin on the Little Miami River, with the idea of superintending the "never-accomplished transformation" of a saw-mill and a grist-mill into paper mills. Of the rude but wholesome life there, Mr. Howells has made a most delightful record in <u>My Year in a Log-Cabin</u>. The boys at least, incited by their father, entered into pioneer life with a zest and a romantic enthusiasm that made hardship and privation attractive and stimulating.

The Island was a most fascinating feature, appealing to the boyish imagination with a sense of mystery. "I do not know just how it is with a boy's world now," he explains, "but at that

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[1] <u>A Boy's Town</u>

time it was a very dangerous world. It was full of ghosts, for one thing, and it abounded in Indians on the war-path, and amateurs of kidnapping and murder of all sorts." Often the Island resounded with the war-cries of little savages, who had tutored themselves in the ways of crime and depredation with Howe's Collections for the History of Ohio and a book called Western Adventure from the Howells press at Dayton. A small gray pony was a favorite participant in these Indian dramas, and figured as an Arab charger when the Moors of Granada charged upon the Spanish camp with their iron-weed javelins.

There was work as well as play; the boys labored manfully at clearing the woods of black-walnut, oak, and hickory, and at planting corn, melons, and interminable rows of sweet-potatoes. In all, the father was comrade and inspiration. The son tells how famously they got on driving the cow out to the new home, "talking of the way-side things so beautiful in the beautiful autumnal day, all panoplied in the savage splendor of its painted leaves, and of the poems and histories so dear to the boy who limped barefooted by his father's side, with his eye on the cow and his mind on Cervantes and Shakespeare, on -

'The glory that was Greece,
And the grandeur that was Rome.'"

It is difficult for a boy of thirteen who talks literature and philosophy with his father, to be a bad boy; and it is not surprising that he should grow up kind-hearted and considerate, as well as imaginative and fanciful. Innumerable reminiscences striking an unmistakable note of sincerity, reveal the sensitive

and thoughtful temper of the lad. Such is the following recollection of a rare moment, when returning with his brother from an evening errand to some neighbor's:

"The shadows fell black from the trees upon the smooth sward, but every other place was full of the tender light in which all forms were rounded and softened; the moon hung tranced in the sky. We scarcely spoke in the shining solitude, the solitude which for once had no terrors for the childish fancy, but was only beautiful. This perfect beauty seemed not only to liberate me from the fear which is the prevailing mood of childhood, but to lift my soul nearer and nearer to the soul of all things in an exquisite sympathy. Such moments never pass; they are ineffaceable; their rapture immortalizes; from them we know that whatever perishes there is something in us that cannot die, that divinely regrets, divinely hopes."

His introduction to literature was through the readings aloud in the family circle, that fine old custom which in these days is so rapidly waning. In the Howells family this custom was an institution. Grandfather Howells kept the only book-store in Hamilton, and the family library was by far the largest private collection in the town. On week day evenings the Book of Worship and the Heavenly Arcana were displaced by the English poets. Moore's Lalla Rookh is the first book he remembers hearing his father read. Thompson's Seasons was a favorite with his elder, while the boy himself liked best the songs of Tom Moore and the metrical romances of Scott. Campbell's Soldier's Dream made a lump come into his throat. He could make nothing of Byron or Cowper, and Burns even

wearied him. Later he took a great fancy to Goldsmith's Deserted Village and to Pope's pastorals, which latter became a source of prolific imitation. Pope's Homer and Dryden's Virgil he never read, although they always occupied a place in the collection. Indeed, he cared little to read poetry to himself, and never until he came to read Longfellow, Tennyson, and Heine, read any long poem without more fatigue than pleasure. But for his writing he preferred poetry to prose.

His only school was the home and the printing-office. Although he has in later years received honorary degrees from a number of universities, few men have been so completely self-educated as Mr. Howells. His actual schooling was irregular in the extreme, and he sets but little value on it. His earliest memory is of a sort of dame school in a private house. Then he came under the tutelage of a master who gave instruction in the basement of a church. Here he disgraced himself in spelling and arithmetic, but displayed a proficiency in geography which he confesses has long since been lost. As a reward for his attainments in that useful science, he received a History of Lexington, Massachusetts, which flattered him immensely, although he was vaguely disappointed in the book. At a private school known as the Academy, he studied what was then called Philosophy, learning from the pictures that "you could not make a boat go by filling her sail from bellows on board", but he did not see why. He then attended a district, or public, school, where the teacher led the life of an executioner, and where he"lived in an anguish of fear." It was here that he discovered the part called Prosody in the back of his Grammar, and was delighted to find that "nature had not dealt so

charily with him concerning the rules of prosody as the rules of arithmetic."

Prosody was at once put into practice on subjects drawn from a book on Greek mythology. He even essayed a tragedy in the meter of The Lady of the Lake, one of the books his father had read aloud to the family. The plot, based upon the history of Julius Caesar as recounted by Goldsmith, featured the tyrannical teacher in the rôle of the great dictator, and was intended to afford the school-boy conspirators an opportunity to wreak their vengeance in a sufficiently bloody manner. The piece, he informs us, was never acted, owing to some difficulty about the hayloft.

Mr. Howells does not consider himself particularly unfortunate in having had so little of formal instruction. Indeed, it seems certain that, during the years of boyhood at least, he was receiving a better education than any of the schools within his reach could have afforded him. Certainly his father's influence compensated amply for that of any teacher he may have missed. Then too, the exactions of the printer's trade, at which he worked from the age of ten, were of precisely the sort to supply the deficiencies of irregular schooling. Furthermore, this occupation was precisely the one to turn him to literature. He was not long in becoming composer as well as compositor. Then followed a wide experience in journalistic work, embracing every sort of newspaper position, and leading finally to a successful career as editor of leading papers and literary periodicals.

Hence, of the factors in Mr. Howells' early environment tending to direct his work as critic and literary theorist, it is

necessary to add to the personal influence of his father, the influence of his father's profession, which may be regarded as standing him in lieu of formal education. There are certain well-recognized advantages in journalism as preparation for a literary career, even when the career is to be that of literary critic, but there are some equally obvious disadvantages, especially apparent when the journalism involves a total sacrifice of university training. Much of Mr. Howells' contempt for academic criticism is based upon misunderstanding. His dismissal of research as a business having nothing to do with the appreciation of literature, has much truth in it, just enough truth, we should say, to make the conclusions misleading. Likewise, his almost exclusive interest in the modern and timely in literature, and in the few really great masters of the past, who are always contemporary, leads him to a scorn of minor masters which does not contribute to a clear-sighted view of the great and the present.

The advantages of undirected reading, too, are undeniable. Following one's own bent adds a zest to the acquisition of knowledge and quickens the faculties of assimilation. But there is a narrowness in it which is only of a different sort from the narrowness of the schools. The independence of literary judgment which it appears to foster, is apt to be rather an independence of taste than of judgment. The reader of My Literary Passions will find the title admirably descriptive. Mr. Howells' early reading was the passionate adoration of one god after another, the passionate denial of one creed to subscribe to the next. He asserts his independence of taste; but in matters of the intelligence there is a susceptibility to the influence of masters, a susceptibility more insidious per-

haps, because wearing the air of freedom, than the blind worship of authority alleged to flourish in the schools.

In the following account of the passions from the great trio of his boyhood, Irving, Goldsmith, Cervantes, to the last and greatest of them all, Tolstoi, we shall not see this deference to the masters entirely outgrown; but we shall observe the gradual acquisition of a guiding principle that operates in the selection of the masters and dictates the terms of allegiance to them. This is none other than the great principle of realism, which he first formulates for himself under the influence of Heine. Henceforth he judges books solely according to their truth or their falsity to life.

HIS "LITERARY PASSIONS"

"To give an account of one's reading is in some sort to give an account of one's life." - _My Literary Passions_

The three grand passions of Mr. Howells' boyhood were Goldsmith, Cervantes, and Irving. Goldsmith's histories of Greece and Rome were precious mines of knowledge, and _The Deserted Village_ became an established favorite at the readings by the home fireside. _The Vicar of Wakefield_ is still for him "one of the most modern novels; that is to say, one of the best." Goldsmith he finds endeared to us by his kindness and gentleness; these are what "make him our contemporary." "They are the source of all refinement, and I do not believe that the best art of any kind exists without them."

His passion for Cervantes was a more ardent one; and, although he has not yet given us the life of Cervantes which he

planned at the age of fifteen, the affection has been a lasting one. "To this day," he confesses, "I cannot meet a Spanish man without clothing him in something of the honor and worship I lavished upon Cervantes when I was a child." The Ingenious Gentleman of La Mancha was his Robinson Crusoe. It was the story, not the literature, that enchanted him when he first heard it from his father, who sometime later presented him with the book, "the most wonderful and delightful book in the world," two stout little volumes in calf, destined to become his inseparable companions throughout boyhood. In fact, he can remember no time during his boyhood when he was not reading it, and at the age of fifty he found that "in what formed the greatness of the book" it seemed to him greater than ever. What forms the greatness of the book is its "free and simple design, where event follows event without the fettering control of intrigue, but where all grows naturally out of character and conditions."

The third of the great friends, Washington Irving, was endeared to him early in life through the charm of the Spanish books, *The Conquest of Granada* and *The Alhambra*. He could not share his father's amusement in the Knickerbocker *History of New York*, but he liked *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Winkle*. The *Life of Goldsmith* he very much preferred to the more authoritative one by Foster, for he found in it a "deeper and sweeter sense of Goldsmith."

In 1851 he went to Columbus, his father being engaged there as a reporter of legislative proceedings, and worked as compositor in the office of the *Ohio State Journal*, at a salary of four dollars a week. At this time he was rapidly losing interest

in having things read to him, coming to read more and more to himself, so that he could let his fancy roam at leisure. He thinks he was beginning to read with a literary sense, that is, with a sense of the author. "I was growing more literary," he explains, "and less human." The characters in books were ceasing to affect him as real persons, although he had moments of intimacy with Ulysses, for he had at last read Pope's Homer. He had become acquainted with Scott's prose, too, by this time; but Scott's novels never became a passion. One is tempted, associating his coldness towards Scott's romances and his adoration of Don Quixote, to pronounce the lad already a realist. But significant as these tastes undoubtedly are, his actual interest was in literature, not in life.

One may believe that for a boy of fourteen he was becoming very literary indeed, to prefer Pope's pastorals to Ivanhoe. The fact is, he became passionately enamoured of purling brooks, finny tribes, enameled meads, fleecy cares, and feathered choirs, not to speak of aerial audiences. He essayed an infinite number of imitations, most of which never reached completion. "They all stopped somewhere about half way," he says. "My swains could not think of anything more to say, and the merits of my shepherdesses remained undecided."

With all his later aversion to the romantic, Mr. Howells has kept a fondness for the artificialities of this pseudo-romanticism of the classic period, which makes no misleading pretensions to reality. However seriously the ardent swains and their Dresden china shepherdesses may have been taken in their day, the modern reader is not tempted to confuse their Arcadia with

any place on the habitable globe. Like the extravaganza in the theater, they may be relished, not as the pièce de résistance, but as dainty confections to come after the feast, by those who are "in the joke of it," as Mr. Howells is wont to say. When he came to read Italian literature, he found Tasso's Aminta and the Pastor Fido of Guarini, "divinely excellent artificialities."

He is rather glad to have had Pope for an idol, because in imitating him he could not help imitating his method of composition, which was essentially the method of intelligence. Furthermore, he is glad to have acquainted himself with the poetry of Pope, for, with all that we may say against it, it was, as a mood of literature, the perfect expression of a mood of civilization.

After the one winter in Columbus, the family moved to the village of Ashtabula, in the northeastern part of the State. The next removal, from Ashtabula to the county seat at Jefferson, inaugurated a period of enlightenment, from which dates his interest in contemporary writers, and in periodicals, and during which he read his first literary criticism. His reading was turned in new directions largely through the influence of a series of literary friendships, some of them fortunately with men older than he, and of different tastes and ideals. Of the friend with whom he shared his Shakespeare, an acquaintance of the printing-office, he says:

"We met in an equality of ambition and purpose, though he was rather inclined to the severity of the scholar's ideal, while I hoped to slip through somehow with a mere literary use of my learning."

The first important event of this period was his suddenly, "without notice or reason," giving his heart of Shakespeare;

and, although Irving, Goldsmith, and Cervantes kept their old altars, the worship in the case of Shakespeare "went to heights and lengths that it had reached with no earlier idol." He revelled with Falstaff in somewhat the personal intimacy of older days.

He found in the dramas many of the qualities which he has finally come to claim as characteristic of realism, of modernity, that is to say, the qualities that make literature truly great. As Goldsmith is our contemporary by virtue of his inherent purity, as Cervantes is modern and realistic in his spacious form, unhampered by the trivialities of plot, so Shakespeare is modern and realistic in his matchless individualizing of character, in his mingling of tears and joy, just as we find them mingled in life, and in the humor that pervades his work. Thus Mr. Howells describes the reality of Shakespeare's world:

"There I found a world appreciable to experience, a world inexpressibly vaster and grander than the poor little affair that I had only known a small obscure corner of, and yet of one quality with it, so that I could be as much at home and citizen in it as where I actually lived. There I found joy and sorrow mixed, and nothing abstract or typical, but everything standing for itself and not for some other thing. Then, I suppose it was the interfusion of humor through so much of it, that made it all precious and friendly."

The first literary criticism that Mr. Howells read was Lowell's; and he followed it implicitely, feeling that any question of it would be blasphemy. He obediently made his farewells to Pope, but he could not find it in his heart to like Spenser.

For Chaucer he came to have a personal attachment, finding him very like Cervantes in "a certain sweet and cheery humanity."

He became friends with Dickens through an old English organ builder, and revelled with a delight long since outgrown in the pages of that fascinating story teller, who then "colored the parlance of the English-speaking race, and formed upon himself every minor talent attempting fiction." "The basis of his work is the whole breadth and depth of humanity itself. It is helplessly elemental, but it is not the less grandly so, and if it deals with the simpler manifestations of character, character affected by the interests and passions rather than the tastes and preferences, it certainly deals with the larger moods through them..........His view of the world and of society, though it was very little philosophized, was instinctively sane and reasonable, even when it was most impossible." From Dickens he gained a conception of essential democracy, presided over by a just and ever-watchful Providence, and it made him very happy to believe in such a world, even though he found it already contradicted by his own small experience. He wished it true, and he found it true "with that truth which is at the bottom of things." "In that world of his, in the ideal world, to which the real world must finally conform itself, I dwelt among the shows of things, but under a Providence that governed all things to a good end, and where neither wealth nor birth could avail against virtue or right."

He had Thackeray also of the old organ builder, and by this time the literary sense which he first felt when he began to imitate Pope, had been completely acquired. In fact, his absorption in literature as divorced from life reached its culmination

during the time of his infatuation with Thackeray - Thackeray, of all novelists "the most thouroughly and profoundly imbued with literature," who speaks in ink, not in blood, like Dickens and Tolstoi. "Literature, not life, was my aim," is Mr. Howell's confession, "and to reproduce it was my joy and my pride." He is at some pains to analyze his fascination with Thackeray's superior airs toward both literature and life:

"What flatters the worldly pride in a young man is what fascinates him with Thackeray. With his air of looking down on the highest, and confidently inviting you to be of his company in the seat of the scorner, he is irresistible; his very confession that he is a snob, too, is balm and solace to the reader who secretly admires the splendors he affects to despise. His sentimentality is also dear to the heart of youth, and the boy who is dazzled by his satire is melted by his easy pathos. Then, if the boy has read a good many other books, he is taken with that abundance of literary turn and allusion in Thackeray, there is hardly a sentence but reminds him that he is in the society of a great literary swell who has read everything, and can mock or burlesque life right and left from the literature always at his command. At the same time he feels his mastery, and is abjectly grateful to him in his own simple love of the good for his patronage of the unassuming virtues. It is so pleasing to one's vanity, and so safe, to be of the master's side when he assails those vices and foibles which are inherent in the system of things, and which one can contemn with vast applause so long as one does not attempt to undo the conditions they spring from."

This boy did not know then, nor for long afterward, "that society, as we have it, was necessarily a sham," that snobbishness was not something that it was possible to reach and cure by ridicule. "Now," he says, "I know that so long as we have social inequality we shall have snobs.........that it is futile to spurn them, or lash them for trying to get on in the world, and that the world is what it must be from the selfish motives that underlie our economic life."

Among the contemporary poets, he never ceased to read and admire Longfellow. Browning and Tennyson he came to know soon after the inevitable nervous break down, which was now at hand, and during which he consoled himself with being a martyr to literature. Tennyson became such another passion as Longfellow, but nothing in Browning except The Ring and the Book seems ever to have made any great appeal to him. "One need not question the greatness of Browning," he admits, "in owning the fact that the two poets of his day who pre-eminently voiced their generation were Tennyson and Longfellow; though Browning, like Emerson, is probably now more modern than either." Tennyson's Maud, which he read first, he thought indeed "pre-eminently voiced" his generation. "I suppose," he continues, that at the time he wrote Maud he said more fully what the whole English-speaking race were then dimly longing to utter than any English poet who has ever lived."

During the winter of 1856, Mr. Howells was in Columbus doing legislative reporting for the Cincinnati Gazette - and reading in the State Library. In the spring he refused an offer of $1000 a year as city editor of the Gazette, fearing that his time

for reading would be limited. This act of devotion was soon to cause him regret, when he came to realize the vital connection between literature and experience. For the hour of the supreme passion was at hand, the passion that was to liberate him forever. It was time for the Spanish idols to be placed in temporary retirement, their shrines occupied by German gods. He was at last to learn at the feet of Heine that his ideal of literature was false.

"I had supposed, with the sense at times that I was all wrong, that the expression of literature must be different from the expression of life; that it must be an attitude, a pose, with something of state or at least of formality in it; that it must be this style, and not that; that it must be like that sort of acting which you know is acting when you see it and never mistake for reality." "He undid my hands, which I had taken so much pains to tie behind my back, and he forever persuaded me that though it may be ingenious and surprising to dance in chains, it is neither pretty nor useful."

After another season of sickness, due to over work, Mr. Howells began his real Columbus period, a time of which he speaks as the heydey of his life. He enjoyed more of cultivated society than he had ever known, met many people with whom he could talk literature, and his friendship with J.J. Piatt ripened into intimacy. In the year 1860, at the age of twenty-three, he formally began his literary career in collaboration with Piatt. But of infinitely more consequence than The Poems of Two Friends was the campaign life of Lincoln, which really did good service, since

Lincoln at the time of his nomination was practically unknown in the East, and which won for its author a post as United States consul at Venice, enabling him to spend the four years of our Civil War in that peaceful city, studying the Italian language and literature.

Notwithstanding the fascination of Dante and mediaeval Italy, his interests turned more and more toward the observation of men and books of the day. In this connection he discovered the weakness of Italian fiction as a record of contemporary life, and devoted himself eagerly to the drama. Of all the dramatists, he loved Goldoni best, and still regards him as the first of the realists, for although he lived in the eighteenth century, he lived to fight hand-to-hand with eighteenth-century romanticism. "Because I have loved the truth in art above all other things," he says, "I fell instantly and lastingly in love with Carlo Goldoni."

Since his return from the first sojourn abroad[1], for

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[1] The subsequent events of Mr. Howells's life may be summarized as follows:

1865. Editorial writing on the Nation, contributing also to the Tribune and the Times.

1866. Assistant editor to James T. Fields on the Atlantic. Secures a literary standing through the publication in book form of Venetian Life.

1872. Becomes editor of the Atlantic on the retirement of Fields, continuing in that position until 1881. The success of Their Wedding Journey encourages him to continue writing fiction.

(concluded on the next page)

exactly fifty years, Mr. Howells has devoted himself mainly, almost exclusively, to contemporary literature, largely contemporary fiction of the realistic variety. And half a century seems to have been all too little. He wishes he could call back some of the time he squandered on the classics. His counsel is to give no time to old literature except that of the greatest masters. All that one can get from minor writers, he maintains, can be had in fuller measure and better quality from the few really great ones. Preference for the second-rate, he regards as mainly an affectation of persons wishing to distinguish themselves from the herd. Schools and periods he would leave to the scholar, whose business is concerned with them. And he would remind the scholar that reading done in order to become familiar with a period is literally a business, a duty, in no way concerned with the love of literature. That must be a passion, not a duty. "Read the old masters," he advises, "and let their schools go, rather than neglect any possible master of your own time. Above all, I would not have anyone read an old author merely that he might not be ignorant of him; that is most beggarly, and no good can come of it."

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1885. Takes up his residence in New York City.

1886 on. Regular editorial contributor to Harpers' Magazine.

Of the American realists, Henry James is accorded the most ecstatic admiration. "In literary handling no one who has written in our language can approach him, and his work has shown an ever-deepening insight." Unfortunately, Mr. Howells' estimates of his great contemporary lose much of their value as criticism through a tendency to lapse into unqualified laudation.

One would hardly expect to find the French realists sharing honors with the Russians in Mr. Howells' affection, but the extreme slightness of their influence upon him is astonishing. In the Erckmann-Chatrian novels, he found a "simple and sincerely moralized realism," comparable to that of the early Swiss realist Jeremias Gotthelf and to that of Björnson. But in the case of many more prominent French writers, the subject matter repelled him, and he found it so far from being "sincerely moralized" as to be positively immoral. Zola he thinks nearest the Russians in the serious handling of his material - the most moral of the French novelists. But he cannot grant even to a Zola such material. Zola is "indecent," not immoral, "through his facts." Granted the facts, he acknowledges his "epic greatness." The realistic theory of Zola and the other Frenchmen, in fact the great body of contemporary French criticism, seems not to have interested him. His own theory is derived inductively through a devoted, truly passionate study of Turgeniev and Tolstoi.

Perhaps we are forgetting the Spanish realists, but their criticism has been confirmatory rather than formative in its influence. Valdés and Emilia Pardo-Bazan, he reverences for their theories as much as for their faithfulness in putting them into

practice. His opinions of the Spanish realists in both lines of endeavor are the echo of those earlier preferences for the Spanish drama; he is as fully assured of the superiority of Spanish fiction to French as he then was of the superiority of Cervantes and Shakespeare to Corneille and Racine.

Turgeniev he read with a"joyful astonishment" at the perfection of art, with a rapture almost inexpressible. "I cannot describe the satisfaction his work gave me; I can only impart some sense of it, perhaps, by saying that it was like a happiness I had been waiting for all my life, and now it had come, I was richly content forever." The dramatic method of Turgeniev he pronounces "as far as art can go," although he was soon to know a method that seemed to transcend art altogether.

What most impressed him was the conscientiousness with which the Russian handled his themes, uttering human nature in its every aspect, as the French professed to do, but in what a different spirit ! The awful seriousness of the quest for truth saddened while it inspired him. His "gay American horizons were bathed in the vast melancholy of the Slav, patient, agnostic, trustful."

At last came Tolstoi. It was, he says, as if the best wine of the feast had been kept until the last. "As much as one merely human being can help another I believe that he has helped me." "He has been to me the final consciousness, which he speaks of so wisely in his essay on Life.........The supreme art in literature had its highest effect in making me set art forever below humanity."

Tolstoi's great influence was an ethical one, but Mr. Howells, although he says he had no longer any desire to imitate the methods of another, can find no terms rich enough to express his boundless gratitude for "the supreme art" as art. It seemed to him unbelievable that Turgeniev had not said the last word aesthetically, with the perfect transparency of his style, his absolute concealment of artifice. But here was no artifice to conceal; here was style of equal transparency divested of all personality, quite without a manner, at least Mr. Howells professes himself unable to state what Tolstoi's manner is. "There are plenty of novelists to tell you that their characters felt and thought so and so, but you have to take it on trust; Tolstoi alone makes you know how and why it was so with them and not otherwise. This is the only trait I can put my hand on, this ability to show men inwardly as well as outwardly."

One of the finest things about Mr. Howells' admiration is his acknowledgment that Tolstoi is not infallible. He detects the false note in the exegesis to The Kreutzer Sonata, which would apply "to marriage the lesson of one evil marriage," as truly as he feels the power of the drama unglossed in Anna Karenina. He admits the propensity of the master's overpowering ethical sense to get the better of his aesthetics. When Tolstoi casts his precious dramatic gift to the winds, lapsing into allegory, when his tales become parables, Mr. Howells remains firm in his conviction that the greatest art as well as the greatest moral power is in allowing things to stand for what they are and not for something else. The simple pathos of Policoushka, the peasant conscrip

is worth more to him than myriads of parables. "The Death of Ivan Ilyitch, the Philistine worldling," he maintains, "will turn the hearts of many more from the love of the world than such pale fables of early Christian life as Work While Ye Have the Light." It is altogether grateful to find this last and permanent passion, this most profound one, to be also the best considered one. It is truer criticism, and does more to win the reader to his cause than, for example, his laudation of Henry James.

It remains to close the chapter with his tribute to the ethical influence of Tolstoi's work, which it is impossible to refrain from giving entirely in his own words, since he has compressed it into a passage perhaps the most notable to be found in the entire range of his writing. Mr. Howells gives his almost entire assent to some of the books commonly least valued of Tolstoi, although he doubts and fears our ability to walk the narrow way of the Savior alone.

"Tolstoi awakens in his reader the will to be a man; not effectively, not spectacularly, but simply, really. He leads you back to the only true ideal, away from that false standard of the gentleman, to the Man who sought not to be distinguished from other men, but identified with them, to the Presence in which the finest gentleman shows his alloy of vanity, and the greatest genius shrinks to the measure of his miserable egotism. I learned from Tolstoi to try character by no other test, and though I am perpetually false to that sublime ideal myself, still the ideal remains with me, to make me ashamed that I am not true to it. Tolstoi gave me heart to hope that the world may yet be made over

in the image of Him who died for it, when all Caesar's things shall be rendered unto Caesar, and men shall come into their own, into the right to labor and the right to enjoy the fruits of their labor, each one master of himself and servant to every other. He taught me to see life not as a chase of a forever impossible personal happiness, but as a field for endeavor toward the happiness of the whole human family; and I can never lose this vision, however I close my eyes, and strive to see my own interest as the highest good. He gave me new criterions, new principles, which, after all, were those that are taught us in our earliest childhood, before we have come to the evil wisdom of the world. As I read his different ethical books, What to Do, My Confession, and My Religion, I recognized their truth with a rapture such as I have known in no other reading, and I rendered them allegiance, heart and soul, with whatever sickness of the one and despair of the other. They have it yet, and I believe they will have it while I live."

II. HIS CONCEPTION OF CRITICISM

Before examining the critical work of any author, it is pertinent to ask what that author's conception of criticism is. What does he think is the use of writing books about books, that is, what does he conceive to be his own status in the world of letters? And then, what does he consider the manner of treating the works of others that may best fulfill that use? The latter question is more fundamental in its direct bearings upon his own practice, but is to some extent dependent upon the first, which is quite as interesting.

The opinions of critics as to the function of criticism range from the most exalted to the most despicable, and are as widely at variance with the value which the world has come to set upon the work of their authors. The English writer John M. Robertson, for example, in his Essays towards a Critical Method, refuses to allow the distinction between the critical and the creative, pointing out the propensity of the latter word, on definition, to dwindle to the mere invention of stories about imaginary persons. Again, so great a critic as Matthew Arnold clings to the traditional distinction[1] , but holds the function of

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[1] "Everybody, too, would be willing to admit, as a general proposition, that the critical faculty is lower than the inventive.

The Function of Criticism at the Present Time.

criticism an essential one in establishing an order of ideas, in creating an intellectual and spiritual atmosphere indispensable for the highest type of creative work. Wordsworth, on the other hand, laments the quantity of time and energy spent in writing books about books. Our American writer Mr. H. C. Vedder[1] resents such disparagement of "unoriginal" work, and asserts his position to be that of a respectable middle-man, a purveyor to the public of literary merchandise. Then, occasionally we come across a reviewer who, under cover of anonymity, confesses his unworthiness even to the modest claims of a respectable middle-man. Thus we have every sort of opinion, and the question is: where in this descending scale shall we find Mr. Howells taking his stand?

It is, indeed, rather disconcerting at the outstart to find our author to all appearances ranging himself with the last class mentioned. We had expected hostility toward that variety of criticism stigmatized as academic, but we find ourselves plunged into a wholesale arraignment of "the vested interests of criticism," which too long have been permitted to insult and browbeat the young writer. So far from creating the current of true and fresh ideas that Matthew Arnold speaks of so beautifully and so confidently,[2] ideas witht which the creative genius may deal divinely, "presenting them in the most effective and attractive combinations, making beautiful works with them," we find, according to Mr. Howells, that "criticism has condemned whatever was

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[1] American Writers of To-day, Boston, 1894.

[2] The Function of Criticism

from time to time fresh and vital in literature; it has always fought the new good thing in behalf of the old good thing; it has invariably fostered the tame, the trite, the negative."[1] So far from endeavoring "to see the object as in itself it really is," "criticism does not inquire whether a work is true to life, but tacitly or explicitly compares it with models, and tests it by them."[1] It actually "cannot conceive of the original except as the abnormal." So far from its being the inevitable precursor of true creative activity, we learn from Mr. Howells that: "If literary art travelled by any such road as criticism would have it go, it would travel in a vicious circle, and would arrive only at the point of departure."[1]

The critic is not even a respectable middle-man, but a parasite on literature, whose "only excuse for being is that somebody else has been." Indeed, Mr. Howells goes so far as to insist upon a simile likening him to a caterpillar:

"The critic exists because the author first existed. If books failed to appear, the critic must disappear, like the poor aphis or the lowly caterpillar in the absence of vegetation. These insects may both suppose that they have something to do with the creation of vegetation; and the critic may suppose that he has something to do with literature....." [2]

In another passage we find the critic likened to a clown, cutting

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[1] *Criticism and Fiction*, p.46.

[2] Ibid., p. 37.

fantastic tricks before high heaven, or words to that effect. Remembering that Mr. Howells has won golden opinions as a novelist, one cannot but ask with amazement why he has condemned himself to the life of the lowly caterpillar, why he so persistently seeks to disport himself in motley.

But one is somewhat relieved to discover on reading at length, and, it must be confessed, between the lines, that Mr. Howells has most ingeniously confused the two things which Matthew Arnold kept always distinct, Criticism and English criticism at its worst. Of Criticism with its capital letter, of Criticism in the abstract, Mr. Howells has no very high opinion, it is true, but there are to be found here and there in his writings, some hopes, vague enough, for its future, and some recognition of past services. These tributes are not lavish, but suffice to indicate that he has allowed such generalizations as those quoted to take considerable color from his exceedingly warm condemnation of certain vices pertaining to the irresponsible reviewer.

Before enumerating these vices, which he has so confusedly attributed to criticism in general, we hasten to explain how it is that literature to-day flourishes more luxuriantly than ever before with this canker at its heart. It is because, while the parasite may fatten itself, may even inflict pain, it is utterly powerless to effect any lasting injury upon the vigorous life-current which sustains it. It wounded John Keats, hurt him cruelly, but kill him it did not. Wordsworth and Browning were treated barbarously, but how long was their fame delayed? "Every literary movement," he maintains, "has been violently opposed at the start,

and yet never stopped in the least, or arrested, by criticism; every author has been condemned for his virtues, but in no wise changed by it."[1] Although the trite, the conventional, the negative, have always been championed, such is the vitality of literature that always the fresh, the novel, and the positive have survived.

But do we not detect here the possibility of a criticism that shall condemn the old and worn-out, and foster the fresh, the novel, the vital? If criticism is utterly without negative effect, is it as helpless to assist in a positive way the growth of what is best in literature? We ask Mr. Howells if critics such as he himself are of any use in the world. "I should like to think that," he replies, "though I am not quite ready to define our use."[1] He goes on to tell us that critics have an obvious historical use, and that aesthetic criticism may have perhaps a "cumulative and final effect," but its efforts at directly affecting the course of literature are foreordained to futility. No phenomenon, he points out, is more common than its uselessness against a book "that strikes the popular fancy," unless it be its uselessness against a book that "does not generally please." "Just as many good novels, poems, plays, essays, sketches," he concludes, "would be written if there were no such thing as criticism in the literary world, and no more bad ones."[2]

But if criticism is so mischievous a thing as you make out, we ask him, is its impotence not rather a blessing than otherwise? Assuredly so. "Otherwise it would be mainly the conventional books and not the original books that would survive; for the

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[1] Criticism and Fiction, p.39. [2] Ibid. p.47.

censor who imagines himself a law-giver can give law only to the imitative and never to the creative mind." But even should the censor resign his self-assumed position as law-giver, should criticism "reconceive its office," and reduce this "to the business of observing, recording, and comparing; to analyzing the material and then synthetizing its impressions,"[1] even then it would be useless to literature. "Even then," he repeats, "it is not too much to say that literature could get on perfectly well without it."

Let us now inquire what has reduced criticism to its low estate and placed it quite without the pale of literary arts; and, if it cannot be made useful, let us see if by any means it can be made a less ignoble pursuit. We find at the outstart that the great bulk of Mr. Howells' essays and editorials on the subject of critical writing are concerned with the many evils which render it as practiced, either useless and misleading , or vicious and degrading. For him it is under a cloud, either of blind superstition or of downright dishonesty. It is hardly possible to discuss each particular shortcoming, but we may tabulate the more important of them under the two heads, Superstitions and Dishonest Practices.

A. Superstition

1. Reverences the classics as infallible.
2. Attempts to set up minor works as classics.
3. Misleads by judging literature with reference to models and to laws derived from the classics.

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[1] Criticism and Fiction, p.47.

B. Dishonesty

1. Judges a writer without reference to his aims.
2. Essays the offensive role of instructor to the author, refusing to learn anything from him.
3. Misrepresents his work by magnifying minor faults into important ones.
4. Descends to personalities.
5. At its worst, adopts the brutal method of satire,
    a. for self-glory.
    b. for spite and prejudice.
    c. from mere habit.
    d. in accordance with the policy of some particular journal.

"I wish the time might come," sighs Mr. Howells, "whem we could read Shakespeare, and Dante, and Homer, as sincerely and as fairly as we read any new book by the least known of our contemporaries." In fact, he wishes them read not only as fairly as we read our contemporaries, but actually <u>as</u> <u>contemporaries</u>. Of this we shall speak presently. In this connection, however, he is objecting to an absurd idolatry which looks upon the great ones as altogether perfect, whereas each is sublimely beautiful in places and intolerably tiresome in others.

Again, superstition bids us see beauties in a great mass of "classic" literature which, however useful to the scholar, the historian, is absolutely barren aesthetically. "At least three-fifths of the literature called classic, in all languages,"

he estimates,"no more lives than the poems and stories that perish monthly in our magazines. It is all printed and reprinted, generation after generation, century after century; but it is not alive; it is as dead as the people who wrote it and read it, and to whom it meant something, perhaps; with whom it was a fashion, a caprice, a passing taste. A superstitious piety preserves it, and pretends that it has aesthetic qualities which can delight or edify; but nobody really enjoys it, except as a reflection of the past moods and humors of the race, or a revelation of the author's character; otherwise it is trash, and often very filthy trash, which present trash generally is not."

Superstition is the very bulwark of that false and misleading school of criticism which dictates laws to the young writer, bids him form himself upon the masters, and sends him to models rather than to life. But since a work of art is to be judged as an expression of life, not as a expression of a literary mood, whether that mood be good or bad, the true test is no body of rules derived from the masters of the past, but truthfulness to life. And the main qualification for judging it, consequently, is not a knowledge of literary moods, of classics, of laws derived from them, but a knowledge of life. It follows, the public is in the end the true arbiter of literary destiny; the true light is Michael Angelo's "light of the piazza;" the true age of criticism will be a "communistic era in taste."

Of the more or less dishonest practices of critics, their pose as instructor to the author is particularly offensive to Mr. Howells. The idea that after an author has taken all the thought and pains and study to make a good book, anyone by the

mere reading of it can tell him how to do it better, he maintains is the height of absurdity. So far from trying to learn anything from the author, who has spent so much time in studying his subject, they take the attitude that he has commited some offence against them.

Critical dishonesty is seen in its most monstrous and revolting form, however, in the critic who regards his author as a victim of the chase, upon whom he is at liberty to set free his tigerish instincts, placing his reliance upon like instincts in the breast of the beholder. The youthful heart especially is prone to take delight in the savage wit, who can rend his author limb by limb, and to gloat over the attack with tomahawk and scalping knife upon one who has done nothing worse than attempting to create something beautiful. It was thus that the youthful Howells revelled in the ferocities of Poe, to his shame in after years. The average of criticism is not now so bad, he thinks, because "the vast good nature of our people preserves us from this worst of criticism without principles."[1] But the same ignoble ideal he finds still to be the ideal of too many critics, to display themselves at the expense of the author under review.

It is now evident, we hope, that Mr. Howells' slaughter of critics is not the grewsome affair it is made out to be, and that suicide is not on his program. We stated at the beginning our belief that his condemnation of criticism as a literary art was made with the sins of particular critics in mind, and we find every one of the specific charges to be directed against practices

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[1] Criticism and Fiction, p. 29.

which he believes retarding the progress of that art. He may rank his books about books as far as he likes beneath his books about imaginary persons; but he has continued to write them, and he has continued year after year in the endeavor to raise the standard of criticism in this country. We do not find it reasonable to believe that any man can labor sincerely and devoutly, as Mr. Howells unquestionably has, throughout a long lifetime, in a cause which he regards as utterly futile and unworthy of his talents.

We leave our first question, then, as to the function of criticism, undecided, as it is undecided in Mr. Howells' own mind, positive that he feels it to be a useful function, even though he is unprepared to define that function. Our inquiry has failed to elicit a satisfactory answer to the main question, but it has exposed what he considers the worst evils of current practice. Our second question, as to the method of criticism, will show the general remedy for these evils, but perhaps we might first mention one or two specific alleviants.

It goes without saying that if we are to have perfect honesty, the one thing needful is a critical conscience, but as a deterrent to dishonesty, Mr. Howells suggests, first of all, a total abolition of the anonymous review. "The man, or even the young lady,"[1] he remarks, "who is given a gun, and told to shoot at some passer from behind a hedge, is placed in circumstances of temptation almost too strong for human nature."

Then, he deplores the reaction from the good old custom of Hunt, Lamb, and Hazlitt,- copious quotation. "He would even

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[1] Elsewhere he says, in effect, <u>especially</u> the young lady.

go so far as to say that there was no just and honest criticism without quotation. The critic was bound to make out his case, or else abdicate his function, and he could not make out his case, either for or against an author, without calling him in to testify."[1]

The general method of criticism, Mr. Howells believes, should be the method of science. Its aim should be to "place a book in such a light that the reader shall know its class, its function, its character."[2] Its office is "to ascertain facts and traits of literature," to discover principles, and to report them.[3] Should it appear that the "light of the piazza" is insufficient illumination for this purpose, we are again reminded that the true science of literature is a science of life. It is a science removed as far as possible from Brunetière's classification of genres, formulation of laws from them, and estimating of their relative value. The ideal critic will know life primarily, and will value literature as a record of life. He will be a "gentle, dispassionate, scientific student of current literature who never imagines that he can direct literature, but realizes that it is a plant which springs from the nature of a people, and draws its forces from their life, that its root is in their character, and that it takes form from their will and taste."[4]

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[1] Imaginary Interviews

[2] Criticism and Fiction, p. 33.

[3] Ibid.,p.37

[4] Ibid.,p.55.

He will be as dispassionate, to use Mr. Howells' famous comparison, as the botanist, who never imagines that he can invent or establish laws, or thinks of denouncing his specimens for not conforming to them. The ideal critic, like the botanist, makes it his business to discover and report. He realizes that "there is a measure of the same absurdity in his trampling on a poem, a novel, or an essay that does not please him, as in the botanist's grinding a plant underfoot because he does not find it pretty.........that it is his business rather to identify the species and then explain how and where the specimen is imperfect and irregular."

Some of Mr. Howells' fellow-critics have become incensed at this denial of the right to express disapproval, and have found the figure of the botanist, like that of the caterpillar, a tempting one for "the tigerish play of satire." As a matter of fact, it may be reduced to absurdity with no great expenditure of ingenuity and with as much brilliancy as the taste of the satirist may dictate. No doubt Mr. Howells has been guilty of using an illustration that overstates the case for dispassionateness, but the whole body of his own work is a continued illustration of his belief in the critic's duty to admire or disapprove. He would bar trampling and ruthless wounding, but not, we feel sure, the right to pass calm and temperate judgment.

More seriously we are inclined to regard his repeated and unequivocal disparagement of the tendency to look upon relative values and neglect the positive and independent merit of a work. We agree that the latter is of most consequence, that one must look to aesthetic criticism for a true appreciation of literature, and that the historical method constantly errs in overrating the positive

merit of classics important merely in the evolution of literature, but we have no hopes that safety lies in ignorance of "movements."

No doubt it has been observed from the quotations cited in the first chapter that the terms *modern* and *contemporary* as applied by Mr. Howells to a literary classic constitute the very highest praise. One is somewhat mystified at first to find all the literary virtues and none of the vices attributed to our own time - until one learns that Shakespeare, and Dante, and Homer are our contemporaries, when it appears that these words *modern* and contemporary are merely Mr. Howells' favorite synonyms for the terms *universal* and *permanent*, ordinarily used in speaking of literary values. We call attention to the substitution because it is significant of the fundamental defect in his method of criticism, which is, in short, to seek the permanent and universal values in a literary work by ignoring its age. If the question is what is its value to us, he can see no reason in asking what was its value in the evolution of literature. He would have every book judged as if it were written to-day.

He is in fact skeptical of all criticism that seeks to "see things whole." "I am not sure yet that the criticism that tries to be of a larger scope, and to see things 'whole,' is of any definite effect. As a matter of fact we see nothing whole, neither life nor art. We are so made, in soul and sense, that we can deal only with parts, with points, with degrees; and the endeavor to compass any entirety must involve a discomfort and a danger very threatening to our intellectual integrity."[1]

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[1] *My Literary Passions*

Would Mr. Howells prefer to have his last novel reviewed by a tiro unfamiliar with his work, unacquainted beforehand with his ideals? We receive in reply a most emphatic "Yes!" A veteran critic reviewing the work of a veteran author he thinks blinded to all but its relative worth. He sees it invariably in the light of what has gone before; whereas the novice brings zest to his task, treats the work as an entity, concerned only with its positive merit, that is, its true merit.

Let us conclude our investigation with an act of arrant disobedience, and endeavor to'place' Mr. Howells with reference to the existing types of literary critics. He has certainly forever parted company with those of the historical type, nor will he have anything to do with the formulation of rules about art. Although he is constantly pointing out to us the beauties of the literature he enjoys, we could hardly put him with the aesthetic critics, for their leaders are avowedly impressionistic and unscientific. He has scarcely more kinship with Lemaître than with Brunetière. If we must give him a name, it shall be <u>ethical</u> <u>critic</u>. His aesthetics, like that of his master Tolstoi, by whose side we place him, is always a matter of ethics. So it is with his science, which reduces to one principle, that of truth to life. Truth to life: that is good art and sound morality.

III. THE IDEALS OF LITERATURE

THE FUNCTION OF LITERATURE.- ART AND MORALITY

"Men are more alike than unlike one another; let us make them know one another better, that they may be all humbled and strengthened with a sense of their fraternity. Neither art, nor letters, nor sciences, except as they somehow, clearly or obscurely, tend to make the race better and kinder, are to be regarded as serious interests; they are all lower than the lowest crafts that feed and house and clothe, for except they do this office they are idle; and they cannot do this except from and through the truth."

Criticism and Fiction, p.188.

Mr. Howells' conception of the aim of literature need detain us but a moment. We have already said enough to indicate that the great and sole function of serious writing is to make the truth prevail. Literature, like science, is one of the great civilizing forces which have raised the human family from a condition of savagery to a happier and richer existence. Like painting, and sculpture, and music, it ennobles through the spirit of beauty which forever lives in the human heart. This spirit of beauty, Mr. Howells quotes from Valdés,[1] "is the beautiful effect which it receives from the true meaning of things; it does not matter what

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[1] Preface to Sister San Sulphizo

the things are, and it is the function of the artist who feels this effect to impart it to others. I may add that there is no joy in art except this perception of the meaning of things and its communication; when you have felt it, and portrayed it in a poem, a symphony, a novel, a statue, a picture, an edifice, you have fulfilled the purpose for which you were born an artist."

We have taken the liberty to italicize one of Valdés' clauses, for it touches the very heart of realistic theory. It makes no difference how insignificant the object, if the artist truly conveys its meaning to the reader, it instructs and ennobles. "The man of our time," says Valdés, "wishes to know everything and enjoy everything: he turns the objective of a powerful equitorial towards the heavenly spaces where gravitate the infinitude of the stars, just as he applies the microscope to the infinitude of the smallest insects; for their laws are identical. His experience, united with intuition, has convinced him that in nature there is neither great nor small; all is equal. All is equally grand, all is equally just, all is equally beautiful, because all is equally divine." "Things that appear ugliest in reality to the spectator who is not an artist," he continues, "are transformed into beauty and poetry when the spirit of the artist possesses itself of them. We all take part every day in a thousand domestic scenes, every day we see a thousand pictures in life, that do not make any impression upon us, or if they make any it is one of repugnance; but let the novelist come, and without betraying the truth, but painting them as they appear to his vision, he produces a most interesting work, whose perusal enchants us. That which in life left us

indifferent, or repelled us, in art delights us. Why? Simply because the artist has made us see the idea that resides in it. Let not the novelists, then, endeavor to add anything to reality, to turn it and twist it, to restrict it. Since nature has endowed them with this precious gift of discovering ideas in things, their work will be beautiful if they paint these as they appear. But if the reality does not impress them, in vain will they strive to make their work impress others."

The question of morality in art generally begins with the old formula of art for art's sake. Has art which exists solely to satisfy the longing for beauty, leaving the elevation of the moral sense out of consideration, any excuse for being? When we called Mr. Howells an ethical critic, we meant to imply that such a question could have no meaning for him. Good art, in short, *is* good morality. He is willing to admit the possibility of an unmoral *aim*,[1] that an artist may create solely with an eye for beauty, but that beauty can ever be the sole *effect* of his creation, is inconceivable. "Morality penetrates all things, it is the soul of all things. Beauty may clothe it on, whether it is false morality and an evil soul, or whether it is true and a good soul. In the one case the beauty will corrupt, and in the other it will edify, and in either case it will infallibly and inevitably have an ethical effect, now light, now grave, according as the thing is light or grave."

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[1] This *aim* is a false one, and to that extent immoral. "Hereafter the creation of beauty, as we call it, for beauty's sake, may be considered something monstrous." - *My Literary Passions*.

The cry against art for art's sake, however, even at this late day, sometimes becomes a sheer plea for didacticism. It goes without saying that realism, having cast out ordinary poetic justice, would scorn to allow the truth to be in the least tampered with by way of making a sermon. We choose the following statement from Mr. Howells' admirable appreciation of the novels of Maria Edgeworth, one of the few talents rare enough to succeed at all under the heavy handicap imposed by moral teaching.

"Fiction had not yet conceived of the supreme ethics which consist in portraying life truly and letting the lesson take care of itself. After a hundred years this conception is not very clear to many novelists, or what is worse, to their critics; and the novel, to save itself alive from the contempt and abhorrence in which the most of good people once held it, had to be good in the fashion of the sermon rather than in the fashion of the drama. It felt its way slowly and painfully by heavy sloughs of didacticism and through dreary tracts of moral sentiment to the standing it now has, and we ought to look back at its flounderings, not with wonder that it floundered so long, but that it ever arrived."[1]

But it should be borne in mind that realism, in freeing literature from the bondage of didacticism, has by no means taken away its office of instruction. While not polemic, it is dominated by a humanitarian impulse, the spirit of democracy, which is in this day to liberate men from the curse of selfishness.

"The art which in the meantime disdains the office of teacher is one of the last refuges of the aristocratic spirit,

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[1] Heroines of Fiction.

which is disappearing from politics and society, and is now seeking to shelter itself in aesthetics.........Democracy in literature is the reverse of all this. It wishes to know and to tell the truth, confident that consolation and delight are there; it does not care to paint the marvellous and impossible for the vulgar many, or to sentimentalize and falsify the actual for the vulgar few."[1]

"The romantic spirit worshipped genius, worshipped heroism, but at its best, in such a man as Victor Hugo, this spirit recognized the supreme claim of the lowest humanity. Its error was to idealize the victims of society, to paint them impossibly virtuous and beautiful; but truth, which has succeeded to the highest mission of romance, paints these victims as they are, and bids the world consider them not because they are beautiful and virtuous, but because they are ugly and vicious, cruel, filthy, and not altogether loathsome because the divine can never wholly die out of the human."[2]

In regard to literature not false to life but immoral in subject matter, Mr. Howells is too much a Russian to believe that any such thing exists. Immorality, he knows, as anyone professing faith in modern realism must know, is ever a matter of treatment, not of subject. He recognizes this fact when he pronounces Zola the most moral of French novelists.

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[1] Criticism and Fiction, p.187.

[2] Ibid., p.183.

Although he recognizes the fact, he weakens most woefully when it comes to accepting the consequences for English and American literature. One of the cardinal doctrines of realism as practiced by his master Tolstoi, grants the novelist the whole domain of life for his field and absolute freedom in its serious treatment; yet Mr. Howells is continually congratulating us upon our Anglo-Saxon squeamishness, which he calls a tradition or a convention of decency, which denies our writers this very freedom. "You cannot deal with Tolstoi's and Flaubert's subjects in the absolute artistic freedom of Tolstoi and Flaubert;" he admonishes our writers," since De Foe, that is unknown among us; but if you deal with them in the manner of George Eliot, of Thackeray, of Dickens, of society, you may deal with them even in the magazines." No doubt the methods of George Eliot, of Thackeray, of Dickens, would be found to-day, even for the Cosmopolitan, within the pale of decency. But after Mr. Howells has told us so often of the infinite superiority of those of Tolstoi; it seems a little cruel to rejoice over the fact that we cannot follow his example. Not one of the English trio fully satisfied him; he saw the true light dawn over the steppes of Russia; he found the last word said in Turgeniev and Tolstoi; and yet he is glad that the darkness still hangs over our land; he finds it right and fitting that the Anglo-Saxon mouth should be stopped. Why? We would fain let the question pass, but the truth must out: in our country we write for young ladies. Is not that a pretty box in which to shut our budding Tolstoi? And how we have searched Mr. Howells' pages with eye alert for the first word of rebellion against our fate!

Grown-up Americans may enjoy their Turgeniev and Tolstoi, may be saddened by their Flaubert and Zola, because the books can be locked up, but let our writers continue to write realism for young ladies.

There is no inconsistency in a realist's objecting to the handling of lewd subjects for mere entertainment. Most people will gladly admit the positive immorality of books which "under a glamour of something spiritual, and beautiful, and sublime, portray the vices in which we are allied to the beasts."[1] The words "under a glamour," indeed, place such works out of consideration as realistic art. Neither as a general proposition are we prepared to deny that many classic authors have sinned in this regard. But here again we are not so ready as Mr. Howells to divorce the historical interest from the aesthetic.

What he calls for is expurgated editions of the classics. He says:

"I hope the time will come when the beast-man will be so far subdued and tamed in us that the memory of him in literature shall be left to perish........that the pedant pride which now perpetuates it as an essential part of those poets shall no longer have its way. At the end of the ends such things do defile, they do corrupt. We may palliate them or excuse them for this reason or that, but that is the truth, and I do not see why they should not be dropped from literature, as they were long ago dropped from the talk of decent people."[2]

No ideal could be farther removed from the scholar's, and we confess ourselves so far under the pedantic delusion as to wish to

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[1] Valdés' Preface. [2] <u>My Literary Passions</u>, p.54.

know all of a great author, however bad he may be at times. Indeed, we should not care to read anything of a master if we felt him apt to prove dangerous on closer acquaintanceship. If at the end of the ends we find Chaucer or Shakespeare corrupting and defiling, we shall foreswear reading altogether and betake us to some cloister.

IV. THE METHODS OF LITERATURE: SOME ASPECTS OF REALISM, NATURALISM, AND ROMANCE.

"I have studied life as it really is, not in dreams of the imagination; and thus I have come to a conception of Him who is the source of all life." - Gogol.

We have seen that realism, according to the definition of Valdés, which Mr. Howells commends most heartily, aims to delight and ennoble the soul by revealing the truth, the idea that resides in things, and this through the ever-living sense of beauty. This was the aim of romanticism at its best, and so far as romanticism was faithful to its highest calling, we are to reverence it. It struggled "to overthrow the classic tradition...... to seek poetry in the common experiences of men and to find beauty in any theme; to be utterly free, untrammeled, and abundant; to be in literature what the Gothic is in architecture. It perished because it came to look for beauty only, and all that was good in it became merged in realism, which looks for truth."[1] Thus classicism perished because it could not find beauty in life as it is, but had to have it conventionalized, and recast in heroic mold. Then romanticism, overthrowing convention, found the divine in the lowest orders of men. But having found beauty, it could not

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[1] Modern Italian Poets. p.135.

be content to leave it unadorned; it must magnify, suppress, sentimentalize, idealize. So finally, realism has succeeded to the high office of making ideas known among men, instructing while it enchants by an artistic revelation of the truth that resides in all things great and trivial. "Romanticism then sought, as realism seeks now, to widen the bounds of sympathy, to level every barrier against aesthetic freedom, to escape from the paralysis of tradition. It exhausted itself in this impulse; and it remained for realism to assert that fidelity to experience and probability of motive are essential conditions of a great imaginative literature. It is not a new theory, but it has never before universally characterized literary endeavor. When realism becomes false to itself, when it heaps up facts merely, and maps life instead of picturing it, realism will perish too."[1]

Realism, then, first endeavors to link art beyond all severance with the actual facts of life; it holds the raison d' être of fiction to be the exact depiction of human conduct and motive. This seems reasonable enough, but your true romanticist will shy at any such words as actual and exact. "As the root of the whole matter," bids Robert Louis Stevenson, "let him bear in mind that his novel is not a transcript of life, to be judged by its exactitude; but a simplification of some side or point of life, to stand or fall by its significant simplicity."[2]

The romancer wishes his characters simplified and unified.

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[1] Criticism and Fiction. p.15.

[2] A Humble Remonstrance: R. L. Stevenson.

From the tangled play of contradictory motives, he plucks out a ruling passion. His story is a train, a procession, of direct causes and effects, many of them dependent upon coincidence and accident. The right thing to keep the story moving is sure to happen, whether the chances of its happening in life are favorable or not. If too obviously not, the author adds events or alters with the purpose of making the tale believable. In fine, he creates a world of his own, which he manipulates as he chooses, claiming for it, if he be a writer at all worthy of consideration, truth to the essentials of life, but scorning life's mere facts. Commonplace, muddling, confusing, unessential facts go to the discard: what can they have to do with an understanding of life? Romanticism at its best, holds it the duty of art to explain life by reconstructing it in a simplified and more intelligible medium. Stevenson again: "For the welter of impressions, all forcible but discreet, which life presents, it substitutes a certain artificial series of impressions, all indeed most feebly represented, but all aiming at the same effect, all eloquent of the same idea, all chiming together like consonant notes in music or like the graduated tints in a good picture. From all its chapters, from all its pages, from all its sentences, the well-written novel echoes and re-echoes its one creative and controlling thought; to this must every incident and character contribute; the style must have been pitched in unison with this; and if there is anywhere a word that looks another way, the book would be stronger, clearer, and (I had almost said) fuller without it."

Now, a realist is not necessarily an artistic madman. We must not accuse Mr. Howells, when he sounds the paean of the commonplace, of denying the essential principle of selection in art. Realism requires the nicest selection, but it selects not to destroy but to preserve the "welter of impressions.....which life presents." The very freshness and charm of life, as well as the depth of its sadness, are to be felt only if the impression is an actual one, with all life's complexity, its confusion, its chaos, if you like, its kaleidoscopic succession of sights, and its inextricable tangling of motives. The manipulation, however skilfully be it accomplished, of "a certain artificial series of impressions....all eloquent of the same idea," deprives the reader of his most precious privilege, to observe life in the actual living through the medium of the printed page.

Some accidents happen in the realistic novel , too, just as they happen in the everyday world; but they are apt to be not of the "moving" variety. Furthermore, they are too often not set right, and the reader accustomed to romantic jugglery cries from his cozy chimney corner: "Pessimist! Life is not like that!" There is no arguing with a reader who wants things to happen in the fashion of play, not in the fashion of this sad world of ours. Nor is there any blaming him, for he has simply not yet outgrown the tastes of his boyhood. He wishes to find in modern literature, a world comparable to that in which moved the Indians, and athletes, and heroes of chivalry who once delighted him. He wishes <u>stories</u>, not life; and the craving for stories is a natural one. Not all members of civilized communities, Mr. Howells reminds us, are

civilized even in their habits; much less should we expect to find all civilized in their tastes. Nay, we all have our moods of barbarism, which may be harmless, but are not "high moods or fortunate moments,"[1] when we relish trapeze performances, prestidigitation, negro minstrelsy, and romantic fiction. It is usually after we have consumed a large quantity of romances that the taste for conjuring becomes a matter of mood, and we take our joy, not in the skilful construction of an imitation of life, but in a mirror held up to Nature herself.

So the ideal is to hold the mirror up to nature, not to make a model illustrating nature, either in hope of eliminating the unessential and confusing, and thus giving truer ideas, or in the childish desire to construct something prettier or more interesting than anything to be found there. This ideal of realism carries with it several implications bearing directly upon the practice of the fictionist, and it is to these aspects that we now turn, with the caution that each rule has its proper exception.

In the first place, realism tends to discard the abnormal and unusual. "In life he (the true realist) finds nothing insignificant; all tells for destiny and character; nothing that God has made is contemptible. He cannot look upon human life and declare this thing or that thing unworthy of notice, any more than the scientist can declare a fact of the material world beneath the dignity of his inquiry."[2] Valdés has pointed out this essential

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[1] Criticism and Fiction. p.106.

[2] Ibid. p.16.

equality of all things, how the divine idea resides in the lowest as well as the highest, but Mr. Howells goes even further, and conceives it his chief mission as a realist to reveal the significance of the long-neglected commonplace. He has made himself the apostle of the trivial; he wishes to teach men to appreciate above all things else, the poetry at their doorsteps. "Oh! poor real life which I love," he cries, "can I make others share the delight I find in thy foolish face!"[1] Heroes and grand climaxes he finds exceedingly rare in life, so rare as to be improbable in fiction, and rather to be shunned as material than sought after. "As in literature the true artist will shun the use of real events if they are of an improbable character, so the sincere observer of man will not desire to look upon his heroic or occasional phases, but will seek him in his habitual moods of vacancy and tiresomeness."[1] Thus the new school "studies human nature much more in its wonted aspects; and finds its ethical and dramatic examples in the operation of lighter but not really less vital motives. The moving accident is certainly not its trade; and it prefers to avoid all manner of dire catastrophies."[2]

In the second place, realism throws an overwhelming emphasis upon character. Human character, it asserts, is the novelist's proper field; and any contriving of plots is to be discouraged as false and mechanical. Stevenson offered the writer a choice: he might either let his characters make the plot or provide the necessary characters to work out a preconceived scheme

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[1] _Their Wedding Journey_.

[2] Essay on Henry James.

of events. For the realist, the second, with whatever dexterity it may be accomplished, is a sin against art. Every event, barring chance and accident, must grow out of human character. Turgeniev is said to have begun his stories by sketching the biography of each personage, formulating completely the tastes, habits, and traits of each, before thinking at all of what they were to do, into what complications their respective traits were to lead them. Then, knowing his group of imaginary people thoroughly, he needed only to bring them together into some relationship, when they would proceed to act out the drama for themselves. The ideal method, whether actually realized or not, is for the artist to refrain from all management of affairs, conceiving his office as reporter, not stage director. To generalize, merely for the sake of clearness, the plot is the beginning of a romantic tale, and upon its construction the romancer expends arduous labor; while the *characters* begin a realistic story, and the plot is the inevitable result rather than the conscious aim. The realist, Mr. Howells maintains, writes "from the beginning forward, and never from the ending backward."[1] Writing from the ending backward is, of course, precisely what Stevenson and Poe recommend in their celebrated essays on the method of composition.

Here again we find Mr. Howells somewhat the extremist, urging the writer to avoid any manner of *pre*vision, placing his entire dependence upon *re*vision. It is a little difficult to imagine Turgeniev's perfection to be the result of such a method,

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[1] *Imaginary Interviews*.

but we are informed that the inspiration of freedom from preëstablished design is capable of crowning a work with"unimagined beauty." The writer as he proceeds is educated out of his mediocrity. For example, the following account informs how Shakespeare was probably educated by the composition of his immortal Hamlet:

"Probably the playwright started with the notion of making Hamlet promptly kill his step father, rescue Ophelia from the attempt to climb out over the stream on a willow branch, forgive his erring mother as more sinned against than sinning, welcome Laertes back to Denmark, and with the Ghost of his father blessing the whole group, and Polonius with his arm in a sling, severely but not fatally wounded, form the sort of stage picture, as the curtain went down, that has sent audiences home, dissolved in happy tears, from so many theatres. But Shakespeare, being a dramatist as well as a playwright, learned from Hamlet himself that Hamlet could not end as he had meant him to end. Hamlet, in fact, could not really end at all, and, in the sort of anticlimax in which the tragedy closes, he must rise from death, another and a truer ghost than the buried majesty of Denmark, and walk the world forever."[1]

In this matter of plot the realist has his most serious difficulty with the unskilled reader; and the quarrel usually resolves into a rebellion of the "savage" against the ending of the story. It is true that the tawdry and theatrical finale that delighted another generation with the spectacle of everybody from

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[1] Imaginary Interviews.

lord and lady to maid and butler ecstatically falling into each other's arms, with the villain safe in the arms of God or the law, has long since been discarded by writers of any pretensions to modernity. The crudest witness, however he may applaud such a delightful consummation, realizes that for the nonce he has forsaken this ill-ordered world and its disappointments. Nevertheless, even in the most serious work, it is still demanded that the ending be right. Almost any amount of cruel truth will be endured throughout the novel, if only, in some subtile manner, it be arranged that finally he shall marry her. How many magazines still advise their contributors to shun the "artistic ending!"

It is refreshing to point for once to a realist who has carried his doctrine in actual practice to a stage which Mr. Howells only commends from afar. Henry James declines to end many of his compositions at all. There are no endings in life, no stories, only episodes; hence the height of veracity to life is to be obtained in fiction by transcribing our existence in its proper episodical nature. Mr. Howells, however, while a passionate admirer of the novels of Henry James, finds definite endings in life, and constantly supplies them to his stories. We think the English critic who some years ago accused him of making a bid for popularity by descending to the conventional "happy ending," was thoroughly mistaken; but Mr. Howells does take pains in finishing his stories.

The novelist must discard the old notion of poetic justice which awarded happiness to virtue and punishment to vice.

Anyone who knows life at all, knows that it is no such fairy tale, that guilt goes often unpunished and that virtue often suffers cruelly. But however futile the quest for happiness, goodness has ever its reward of inward peace; and whatever of happiness may be purchased at the price of sin, the guilty soul lives ever with an inward unrest. This is for Mr. Howells the supreme truth of life which the realist has it ever in his power to teach those who come to learn the truth. It is the real tragedy of Anna Karenina - the inward unrest. It is this lesson which few have been strong enough to realize. Maggie Tulliver realized it before it was too late, when she left Stephen Guest at the inn in Mudport:

"But she raised her eyes and met his with a glance that was filled with the anguish of regret - not with yielding. 'No - not with my whole heart and soul, Stephen,' she said, with timid resolution. 'I have never consented to it with my whole mind. There are memories, and affections, and longings after perfect goodness, that have such a strong hold on me; they would never quit me for long; they would come back and be pain to me-repentance. I couldn't live in peace if I put the shadow of a wilful sin between myself and God. I have caused sorrow already - I know - I feel it; but I have never deliberately consented to it; I have never said,"They shall suffer, that I may have joy." It has never been my will to marry you; if you were to win consent from the momentary triumph of my feeling for you, you would not have my whole soul. If I could wake back again into the time before yesterday, I would choose to be true to my calmer affections, and live without the joy of love.'"

This tremendous moral force with which realism has endowed modern art, so different from the false and clumsy didacticism of an earlier day, is to Mr. Howells the largest aspect of the school he champions. Veracity to life is his test of morality in art, but it is more; it is scarcely too much to say that with him it is a religion of art. And this ethical, even religious, import of realism, so far from being at variance with its aesthetic creed, is the very source and origin of all sound artistry. The endeavor to be true not symbolically but actually, has been the greatest stimulus to technique that the art of fiction has ever known. "The art of fiction häs, in fact, become a finer art in our day than it was with Dickens and Thackeray. We could not suffer the confidential attitude of the latter now, nor the mannerism of the former, any more than we could endure the prolixity of Richardson or the coarseness of Fielding. These men are of the past - they and their methods and interests; even Trollope and Reade are not of the present."[1]

The modern artist is a scientist in method; his responsibility to be veracious obliges him to remain an impassive witness of his drama; his ideal is one of self-obliteration, detachment, objectivity. The old, undramatic, subjective, intuitive method which licensed all manner of pleading, excusing, explaining, and interpreting, is little short of an insult to the modern reader. Comments and judgments, like those of Thackeray, sometime highly valued as an expression of the <u>author's personality</u>, have no

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[1] Essay on Henry James.

conceivable place in a modern novel. A dramatist would scarcely commit a more grievous artistic sin should he spring upon the stage during the presentation of his play and explain the action to the audience or blame his characters publicly for their misdeeds. The author's personality is, to Mr. Howells' notion, the one thing needful to destroy the value of research.

But, even if desirable, is this ideal of absolute impersonality at all possible of realization? The reader who is skeptical in this regard may convert himself by an extremely simple test, the reading of Giovanni Verga's beautiful story, I Malavoglia (translated under the title: The House by the Medlar-Tree). "When we talk of the great modern movement towards reality," says Mr. Howells in his introduction to the Harper translation, "we speak without the documents if we leave this book out of the count, for I can think of no other novel in which the facts have been more faithfully reproduced, or with a profounder regard for the poetry that resides in facts and resides nowhere else." "He (Verga) seems to have no more sense of authority or supremacy concerning the personages than any one of them would have in telling the story, and he has as completely freed himself from literosity as the most unlettered among them."

The reader who approaches I Malavoglia in spirits for a Crawford romance will have his difficulties with the opening chapters. There, nothing is announced, simplified, isolated, or explained; no clues are thrown out to excite the curiosity. It is an actual transportation to the Italian village where Padron 'Ntoni and his family, Don Silvestro, La Vespa, Cousin Agostino Goosefoot,

Uncle Crucifix, Nunziata, and a bewildering number of other personages are seen at their daily occupations and gossip. The reader lives with them in Trezza, and learns to know them much as he would become acquainted with the inhabitants of any village in which he might take up his residence, through their daily acts, and the often misleading testimony of their neighbors. It is a book to be avoided by those who must have life simplified, unified, and interpreted by the author. The tragic degeneration of 'Ntoni's 'Ntoni is as obscure in its causes as that of any young friend of ours who goes to the bad. With nothing worked up for effect, it is a tragedy of thrilling interest. There is idyllic sweetness in it, too, and humor; a tender beauty along with the darkness and sordidness. There is, as Mr. Howells points out, a profound poetry in its facts; and its sadness is the sadness of life everywhere, especially where, as among such simple peoples as those of Southern Italy, men have not yet learned the lessons of humanity and brotherly love; and finally, its lesson is the lesson of life everywhere.

"There, as in every part of the world, and in the whole world, goodness brings not pleasure, not happiness, but it brings peace and rest to the soul, and lightens all burdens; and the trial and the sorrow go on for good and evil alike; only, those who choose the evil have no peace."

Such supreme veracity as that of Verga, imposes upon the artist a certain limitation important enough to be classed as an aspect of realism. No author, after a mere season of residence in Italy, could write as he has done of Italian fisherman. Verga <u>knows</u> his characters, inwardly and outwardly; he knows the

minutiae of their existence, their habits, their traits, and their propensities; he knows their lightest and their profoundest thought. He knows their milieu: every shape and color in the eyes of his fishermen is known to him; the sea they strive with is his sea; the grass that grows beneath their feet is his grass. And every realist must, in a sense not demanded of the romancer, know his characters and their milieu. George Eliot had her Romola, and Flaubert his Salammbo, but both artists came home to do their most realistic work.

In our country, with its confusing diversity of scene and character, the desire for veracity has led each individual realist to cultivate his own little garden-patch, resulting in a library of "local color," descriptive in the aggregate, of the whole continent. Verisimilitude has become a passion; inexactitude in the matter of a bit of costume, a turn of speech, a rock, a plant, a bird, or a tree, has become a most serious literary offence. If this mechanical accuracy were all, it would perhaps not be so important, but that is only one expression of a spirit that goes to the heart of things. With it has come a new technique, a perfection of artistry, and more wonderful than all, that spirit of democracy in literature which is the soul of modern realism. Nothing in our literary history appears to Mr. Howells quite so amazing as the promptitude with which the effete romanticism of the South, so direly afflicted with Walter-Scottism and Fenimore-Cooperism, when it once took the breath of realistic life, abandoned its former absurdities, and became great in our literature. Yet this must always happen when the sense for the real is awaken-

ed and the pilgrimage to the shrine of Truth begun. Out-worn ideals are discredited; "literature.....undergoes transformation. The ugly stands beside the beautiful; or rather, there is no longer ugly or beautiful, neither ideal nor real, neither infinite nor finite........There is but one thing only, the Living."[1]

It remains to speak of that development of realistic art known as naturalism. Valdés in his invaluable preface summarizes his position as follows:

"I believe firmly with the naturalist writers that man represents on this planet the ultimate phase of animal evolution, and that on this supposition the study of his animal instincts and passions is interesting, and explains a great number of his actions. But this study has for me only a historic value, because if man proceeds directly from animality, every day he goes farther and farther away from it, and this and nothing else is the basis of our own progress. We come surely from the instinctive, the unconscious, the necessary, but we are going forward toward the rational, the conscious,and the free. Therefore the study of all that refers to the rational, free, and conscious mind as the explanation of a great proportion of human acts, the only noble and worthy ones, is far superior to the first. It is more interesting to study man as man than as an animal, although the naturalist school thinks otherwise........In order that there should be beauty in man, it is necessary that he show himself as man, and not as brute."

Valdés' accusation is, in effect, that the naturalistic work of the French novelists, however true to life it may be, is unsatisfactory

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[1] De Sanctis: History of Italian Literature.

because of its emphasis upon the physiological and neglect of the spiritual. This is substantially the attitude taken by Mr. Howells. The new school of realism, he says, "is largely influenced by French fiction in form; but it is the realism of Daudet rather than the realism of Zola that prevails with it; and it has a soul of its own which is above the business of recording the rather brutish pursuit of a woman by a man, which seems to be the chief end of the French novelist."

V. REALISM IN ENGLISH FICTION.

We shall now briefly review with Mr. Howells the work of the English novelists with reference to their success in depicting life as it truly is, that is, as he might put it, with reference to their modernity. The essentials of modernity, "a voluntary naturalness and instructed simplicity," are to be found in generous measure as far back along the line of English fiction as Defoe, an artist more modern than either Fielding or Richardson. It is his matter, not his manner, that removes Defoe from the nineteenth century, and for the same reason Mr. Howells thinks Fielding removed a vastly farther distance. In this respect they all belong to a time before the decencies became traditional in our literature.

If we cannot begin the line of nineteenth-century heroines with Clarissa Harlowe (considering characteristics, not years, of course, and disregarding the claims of a century to be exactly a hundred years long), it is the fault of her impossible environment, not at all the fault of her character, which is a triumph of modernity. Richardson was more at home in the middle-class setting of Clarissa Harlowe than in either the higher circles of Sir Charles Grandison or the lower ones of Pamela. The cunning hand to transcend the artifices of the epistolary form, so adverse to the requisite "voluntary naturalness and instructed simplicity," he always had. And he has revealed with minutely faithful, mirror-like touches the soul of the persecuted girl, with all her

principles, her impulses, her resentments, and her waverings, in a portrait true to our modern life with its altered conditions and circumstances, in the measure, says Mr. Howells, "that many great-grandmotherly miniatures are like the photographs of their great-granddaughters."[1]

To Oliver Goldsmith Mr. Howells accords the honor of elevating eighteenth-century fiction into the regions of nineteenth-century purity. The Vicar of Wakefield, eighteenth-century to the core and replete with opportunity for eighteenth-century indecency, sounds the new note of reticence so clearly and sweetly that it is scarcely too much to crown its author the creator of the new novel. However little Oliver Goldsmith may have realized it, the note is a prophetic one. A "prophetic sensibility," let us use Mr. Howells' phrases, restrains his realism and makes him stop short of incidents that Richardson portrays with a "pious abhorrence" and Fielding with a "blackguardly sympathy."

In point of art, the creation may not measure up to the standards of modern realism. The hand of the author rests too palpably, too heavily upon the shoulder of poor Doctor Primrose, pushing him from disaster into still more hopeless disaster. The accumulation of woe piles up with a directness and a certainty of arrangement that operates in the world of books more often than in the world of chance. We suspect that a series of traps is being set for the kind old clergyman, and that the author's hand is in the conspiracy. Obviously, the author's cooperation is a frequent necessity if we are to have fiction instead of history, but, as we

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[1] Quotations not otherwise noted are from Heroines of Fiction.

have already seen, it is in concealing himself that the realist of to-day finds his deepest concern. Witness the indirectness and delays attending the disasters that accumulate upon our critic's own Silas Lapham, how they create the illusion of actuality. Perhaps the burning of the house on the water side of Beacon Street is the only instance where we detect Mr. Howells in the act of rushing with any promptitude to the assisstance of tardy fate.

But The Vicar of Wakefield"imparted to all Europe the conception of a more exquisite fiction," a conception to whose influence of the continent Goethe testifies, a conception which was fixed as an ideal by the English women, Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen. However much these ladies were indebted to Richardson as a model, the gentle Goldsmith was their inspiration. "They forever dedicated it (the Anglo-Saxon novel) to decency; as women they were faithful to their charge of the chaste mind; and as artists they taught the reading world to be in love with the sort of heroines who knew how not only to win the wandering hearts of men, but to keep their homes pure and inviolable."

Just as Goldsmith was the first to realize in full measure the pure charm of family life, so Fanny Burney was the first to realize fully the charm of girlhood. The advent of Evelina was the début of the Nice Girl in literature, the girl who has held her own in Anglo-Saxon fiction for one hundred and twenty-seven years.

Evelina is modern to the finger tips, although the means of realizing her are as obsolete as the environment in which she

moves. "Nobody writes novels in letters any more; just as people no longer call each other Sir and Madam, and are favored and obliged and commanded upon every slight occasion; just as young ladies no longer cry out, when strongly moved, 'Good God,sir,' in writing to their reverend guardians; or receive prodigious compliments; or make set speeches, or have verses to them posted in public places; or go to amusements where they are likely to be confused with dubious characters." She is equipped with the conventional hard-hearted father who shrouds her origin in a romantic mystery which is really quite guiltless, surrounded by the choicest snobbery of the period, with a terrible grandmother thrown in; and she very narrowly escapes the regulation abduction at the hands of Sir Clement Willoughby. This was at a time when the abduction, in literature at least, was yielding as little ground as the elopement. "All over England heroines were carried off in chairs and chariots to lonely country houses, there to be kept at the mercy of their captors till the exigencies of the plot forced their release. It must have been a startling innovation that Evelina should be let off so easily as she was. " "But even this was not so strange," adds Mr. Howells, "as that in an age of epistolary fiction she should be allowed to portray in herself that character of a bewitching goose that she really was, and that her author should effect this without apparent knowingness, or any manner of wink to the reader. Evelina is a masterpiece, and she could not be spared from the group of great and real heroines."

With Jane Austen the novel reached its perfection as a simple portrayal of life, but it first had to pass through the

hands of Maria Edgeworth, hard hands if we are to trust the popular superstition fostered by many critics who dispose of her as teacher, moralist, and sermoner. Mr. Howells pleads for a reversal of this sentence; not that her work did not suffer to an unusual degree from the didacticism of her time and especially from the well-intentioned meddling of her father. Even granting for generosity's sake that the crudities are all Miss Edgeworth's own, there remains enough of pure art to secure her place in this brilliant trio of realists. Scott confessed his admiration mixed with envy for "Miss Edgeworth's wonderful power of vivifying all her persons, and making them live as beings in your mind." Turgeniev was inspired by her studies of Irish life to perform a similar service for his own country in the Notes of a Sportsman, a book which inclined the Czar to the emancipation of the serfs.

When we come to Jane Austen, we must have done with apologies. "After Defoe and Goldsmith she was the first to write a thoroughly artistic novel in English, and she surpassed Goldsmith as far in method as she refined upon Defoe in material," which is to speak of infinity in refinement. "Jane Austen was indeed so fine an artist, that we are still only beginning to realize how fine she was; to perceive, after a hundred years, that in the form of the imagined fact, in the expression of personality, in the conduct of the narrative, and the subordination of incident to character, she is still unapproached in the English branch of Anglo-Saxon fiction. In American fiction Hawthorne is to be named with her for perfection of form; and the best American novels are built upon more symmetrical lines than the best English novels, and

have unconsciously shaped themselves upon the ideal which she instinctively and instantly realized."

In spite of her artistry, rather because of it, Jane Austen does preach no less forcibly but much more eloquently than the avowedly didactic Maria Edgeworth. Archbishop Whatley in his critique finds her novels "combining, in an eminent degree, instruction with amusement, though without direct effort at the former." Maria Edgeworth's father would no doubt have thought the former much diluted. According to Mr. Howells, she voices in firmer and clearer tones than may be heard from any before her "an indignant sense of the value of humanity as against the pretensions of rank." He finds her work comparable, in its way, to the French Revolution of about the same time as an assertion of the Rights of Man. We own that this similarity had never struck us before, but certainly agree that in her books the snob "is fully ascertained for the first time," that Lady Catharine de Burgh in <u>Pride and Prejudice</u>, John Dashwood in <u>Sense and Sensibility</u>, Mr. Elton in <u>Emma</u>, General Tilney in <u>Northanger Abbey</u>, Sir Walter Eliot in <u>Persuasion</u>, are truly "immortal types of insolence or meanness which foreshadow the kindred shapes of Thackeray's vaster snob-world, and fix the date when they began to be recognized and detested." The encounter of Elizabeth Bennet with the irate Lady Catharine de Burgh is perhaps the most memorable of a number of exhilarating scenes which the reader must finish with a sense of personal triumph in the victory of the heroine as champion of humanity and with an increased detestation of whatever is presumptuous and arrogant. It is in such a scene, too, that one must

realize the sincerity of Scott's tribute to the significance and effectiveness of a "voluntary naturalness and instructed simplicity" which he himself too often avoided. After reading Pride and Prejudice for the third time, he wrote in his Diary: "That young lady had a talent for describing the involvements, feelings, and characters of ordinary life which is to me the most wonderful I have ever met with. The big bow-wow I can do myself like anyone going; but the exquisite touch which renders common things and characters interesting from the truth of the description, and the sentiment, is denied me."

One cannot doubt that Jane Austen rejoices in every word of Elizabeth Bennet's, but it is emphatically not Jane Austen speaking through the mouth of her heroine. Word and sentiment alike belong to none other than Elizabeth Bennet, and as always there is an utter absence of noble rage, of rhetoric, of fine speeches carefully prepared by the author. It is the consummate skill of presenting a portion of life in the actual. The situation itself is as unpretentious as its handling. The Divine Jane "seems to have known intuitively that character resides in habit, and that for the novelist to seek its expression in violent events would be as stupid as for the painter to expect an alarm of fire or burglary to startle his sitter into a valuable revelation of his qualities."

Anne Eliot, the heroine of Persuasion, may be regarded as the womanly complement to Elizabeth Bennet. She is the most distinguished and lovable exponent of those womanly qualities most opposed to those of Elizabeth, and in that sense the stories

are companion-pieces that testify most eloquently to the versatility of their author. Anne is not weak, but certainly without self-assertion, and allows her family to bully her into breaking her engagement to Frederick Wentworth, a young officer of the navy. The lovers never cease to love each other, however, and a reconciliation is at last effected - entirely through character, through the natures of the lovers themselves. Louisa Musgrove's jumping from the sea-wall at Lyme Regis is the only case where anything resembling the traditional machinery for uniting lovers is brought into action.

The meeting of the lovers at Kellynch Hall, and Anne's rescue from the teasing clutches of two-year-old Walter is one of the most lifelike incidents, and utterly unlike a device. In comment upon this passage Mr. Howells says:

"As any practised reader of fiction could easily demonstrate, this is not the sort of rescue to bring about a reconciliation between lovers in a true novel. There it must be something more formidable than a naughty little boy that the heroine is saved from: it must be a deadly miscreant, or a mad bull, or a frightened horse, or an express train, or a sinking ship. Still it cannot be denied that this simple, this homely scene, is very pretty, and is very like things that happen in life, where there is reason to think love is oftener shown in quality than in quantity, and does its effect as perfectly in the little as in the great events."

The key to Jane Austen's perfection is character, and it is through the gradual perfecting of character drawing that the art of fiction has risen from its primitive condition to the

perfection of modern realism. "The wonder of Jane Austen," Mr. Howells explains, "is that at a time when even the best fiction was overloaded with incident, and its types went staggering about under the attributes heaped upon them, she imagined getting on with only so much incident as would suffice to let her characters express their natures movingly or amusingly. She seems to have reached this really unsurpassable degree of perfection without a formulated philosophy, and merely by her clear vision of the true relation of art to life."

There is no doubt in Mr. Howells' mind that thinking grown-ups have tired of Sir Walter Scott the romancer, and have given over the "monstrous fables" which he "palmed off upon his generation" to the delectation of boys and girls, and only young boys and girls at that. Of the earlier Scotch stories, where he concerned himself with recording actual life and was content to remain upon familiar ground, they have not tired. We can hardly believe with our critic that _Ivanhoe_ and _Quentin Durward_ have fallen on such evil days, and would be unwilling to accept the full implication of such a statement as the following: "His evolution as a historical novelist reveals the simplicity of his nature and the open-hearted directness of his aim so winningly that you love the man more and more, while you respect the artist less and less." It is an admirable sentence, nevertheless, not only as an exceedingly clear and graceful expression of Mr. Howells' own attitude toward the great romancer, but for the suggestion, much the same as that left by Carlyle's essay, that it is Scott the great and good man who comes at last to hold first place in our

affections. We too find something inexpressibly winning in his simple and open-hearted abandonment of his native heath, fearing that his readers must tire of it.

The deadly aversion with which Mr. Howells regards the historical romance as a type of fiction is well known even to those unfamiliar with his criticism. Readers of his stories will recall many conversations on the subject. For the invention of the type as we know it, Scott must bear the blame. One may as well have done with pointing out antecedents and confess that but for him its dazzling career through nineteenth-century fiction would be unimaginable. The true and worthy ends of that fiction it subserved only to the extent that it popularized fiction in general. Nor was this service inconsiderable in overcoming a Puritanic prejudice against the novel. That class of good people was not small who regarded novel reading at its worst as a sinful debauch, a revel in lies, and at its best as a waste of time. But when the droll idea that novels could teach something so useful as history became disseminated among them, a change of attitude resulted. The story that sugar-coated the pill of solid learning was seen to be not so altogether corrupting and despicable a thing. It became even valued for the dilution of facts it was supposed to contain, without question, with no notion, of the eternal truths it should have contained but missed so sadly. Thus was the way prepared for an appreciation of the modern masters and a reverence for their ability to teach the no less useful history of everyday life; and one should in justice grant the "monstrous fables" due credit for their influence in the modern movement which has redeemed the novel

from its former low estate and at last exalted it to the chief place in our literature.

Offended devotees of the great wizard (and Mr. Howells is quite mistaken as to their number among mature and culivated readers) will be somewhat consoled by the warmth of his admiration for the women of the Scotch tales. Lucy Ashton, in The Bride of Lammermoor, "persuasive of her reality," is the exception proving the rule that Scott fails most in portraying his lords and ladies, especially the ladies. She divides honors with Jennie Deans, and these too real heroines lead Mr. Howells to reflect how imperfect a measure of Scott's possibility was his actual performance. "If he had not been driven to make quantity, what quality might not he have given us! If he had not had the burden of telling a story upon him, how much more he might have told us of life! If he had not felt bound to portray swashbucklers, with what gracious and touching portraits of womanhood might not he have enriched his page! The man himself was so modest and single of heart that the secret of the ever-womanly would gladly have imparted itself to him if he had not been, as it were, too shy to suffer the confidence. Whenever he caught some hint of it by chance, how clearly he set it down!"

It must by this time have been observed that Mr. Howells does not hesitate to judge a novel by its women, praising or condemning usually as its heroine is true or false to life. He has, in fact, a favorite theory that "a novel is great or not, as its women are important or unimportant," and alleges as proof the whole line of English and American novelists, realists and

realescents, from Richardson to Mrs. Humphry Ward, as well as Goethe, Manzoni, Balzac, Turgeniev, Zola, De Maupassant, Björnsen, Valdés, Galdós, Verga, and Sudermann. "Apparently the ever-womanly refuses herself to the novelist who proposes anything but truth to nature; apparently she cannot trust him. She may not always be so very sincere herself, but she requires sincerity in the artist who would take her likeness, and it is only in the fiction of one who faithfully reports his knowledge of things seen that she will deign to show her face, to let her divine presence be felt. That is the highest and best fiction and her presence is the supreme evidence of its truth to the whole of life."

Real women perished in the thin air of romanticism, so that among the followers of Mrs. Radcliffe and Scott, both of whom did give us a few, we find almost none. Using his remembrance or oblivion test for the vitality of characters, Mr. Howells cannot recall a single heroine from Charles Brockden Brown, although Cooper had occasional need for delicate and lady-like "females" to act as captives among his Indians. When the realescents like Balzac, Hugo, Bulwer, and Dickens returned to the study of life, the heroine returned to literature.

Mr. Howells, like his master Tolstoi, reverences Charles Dickens because he found the divine in the most lowly lives. Even the romantic "swash of sentimentality" which saturates the pages of *Old Curiosity Shop* does not blind him to the greatness and nobility of the conception, the poor little girl's devotion to her demented grandfather, wandering over the country with him, faithful till her death. He finds Dickens' humor as well as his

pathos, not the best and finest; his drama too often melodrama; his characters too often "monsters."

Edith Dombey, "the first of that deadly-haughty line" of Dickens heroines, is a "sincere nature," and "there are hints of noble tragedy in her love and pity for her husband's neglected daughter Florence," who, by the way, is a monster. But Edith's drama is sacrificed to the "blue fire and muted violins" of melodrama. There is the same theatricality, splendid theatricality, of course, that makes the barbarian in one long to see Nancy Sykes die on the stage, bathed in blue light, to the music of muted violins, raising herself with difficulty on her knees and holding the white handkerchief high towards Heaven. How one would thrill to see Edith Dombey defying Carker, the knife in her hand, "uprearing her proud form as if she would have crushed him !"

"He did not venture to advance towards her; but the door by which he had entered was behind him, and he stepped back to lock it. 'Lastly, take my warning! look to yourself!' she said, and smiled again. 'You have been betrayed, as all betrayers are. It has been made known that you are in this place, or were to be, or have been. If I live, I saw my husband in a carriage in the street to-night!' 'Strumpet, it's false!' cried Carker. At the moment, the bell rang loudly in the hall. He turned white, as she held her hand up like an enchantress, at whose invocation the sound had come. 'Hark! do you hear it?'"
The whole scene is wonderfully written for the theatre - and could have happened only there.

David Copperfield is pronounced the truest as well as

the shapliest book that Dickens ever wrote. Of the courtship of David and Dora, Mr. Howells says:

"I do not know in all fiction a purer study of young love.......it is true that it was no solution of life's problem for David; and in the background all the while is Agnes Wickfield, waiting for her innings. But a truer art than Dickens's, or Dickens's time......would have recognized a higher duty than the reader's comfort in the situation."

"The criticism of Dickens which denied him great power and great deed in fiction," concludes Mr. Howells, "would be more dishonest than his worst faking." He really created a vast though fantastic world of his own, which cannot be visited without "a certain awe for the mighty talent which reared it," and although the monuments of our century will be those of veracity, to refuse to visit this titanic structure of the past is to leave one's self poor indeed.

While Dickens was creating a romantic world out of real materials, Hawthorne, to turn to the "American condition" of English fiction, was seeking the realities in romance; and Mr. Howells ranks the works of the American master in his affection according to his success in holding fast to the realities. _The Blithedale Romance_, he places first, likening it to a mechanical toy with a mainspring of reality. Then comes _The Scarlet Letter_, _The Marble Faun_, and last of all _The House of the Seven Gables_. This descending scale, however, scarcely does justice to his admiration for _The Scarlet Letter_. Indeed, were it not for his repeated statements to the contrary, we should say he preferred that

novel to The Blithedale Romance. He finds every character, except little Pearl, vitally real. "Through the veil of the quaint parlance, and under the seventeenth-century costuming, we see the human heart beating there the same as in our own time and in all times, and the antagonistic motives working which have governed human conduct from the beginning and shall govern it forever, world without end." Each scene in the drama challenges to other as the most vital. Hester facing that terrible crowd from the pillory, the child of her sin in her arms and the scarlet letter burning on her breast, her guilty companion in the rôle of authority charging her to name its father, and to complete it all, her husband in the background awaiting her decision - this tremendous situation must remain forever in the mind of the reader. Yet Mr. Howells finds a"ripened richness of anguish," brought by the passing years of suffering, in the forest meeting of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, where she discloses the horror of their relation to Roger Chillingworth. He finds Hawthorne a Russian here, slipping out and away from the tragedy, leaving Hester alone to dominate this exalted moment.

In Thackeray, Mr. Howells returns to a passion of his younger days, with admiration for a great talent possessing superior instincts toward reality, but with regret that he should have served a literary time that admired caricature, sentimentality, and worse than all, impertinence, that permitted an author to walk through his pages, sneering, petting, or proudly exhibiting his creations.

Thackeray's most perfect character, Becky Sharp, actually succeeds in spite of her creator. He tries in vain to distract us by nudges, whispers, and even shouts:

"He is boisterously sarcastic at her expense, as if she were responsible for the defects of her nature, and must be punished for her sins as well as by them. His morality regarding her is the old conventional morality which we are now a little ashamed of, but in his time and place he could scarcely have any other; after all, he was a simple soul, and strictly of his epoch. A later and subtler time must do finer justice to a woman badly born, and reared in dependence and repression; liberated from school to a world where she must fight her own way; taught the evil consciousness of the fascination which she had but which she never felt for men; married to a reprobate aristocrat not her superior in nature, and distinctly her inferior in mind; tempted by ambition and spurred by necessity the greater since she had her husband as well as herself to care for, she was predestined to the course she ran; and she could not have run any other, made as she was, so clever, so pretty, so graceful, so unprincipled."

Thackeray's art, with all the faults in the process, has tremendous virtues, and the resultant picture is a great one. At the climax in Becky's career, where Rawdon enters unexpectedly upon her supper scene with Lord Steyne, the author, true to his finer instincts, holds his hand, and commits his work to the reader's intelligence. The only false and wrong touch in this great and intense scene, is that which leaves the reader with the impression that Rawdon Crawley is somehow better than she.

Mr. Howells regards Pendennis as Thackeray's greatest book, in spite of the impossibly romantic situation in which he places Helen Pendennis. He will not accuse Thackeray of being the inventor of the case in which a lady continues to live as a respectful and dutiful wife while secretly subsisting upon the cherished memories of some love long lost, but he does blame him for his fervor in preaching the doctrine.

George Eliot, Mr. Howells pronounces "the greatest talent in English fiction after Jane Austen, but a talent of vastly wider and deeper reach than that delicate and delightful artist." It is useless to compare with her any of her contemporaries, neither Dickens, nor Thackeray, nor Reade, nor Anthony Trollope, none except Hawthorne, and none who come after except Thomas Hardy. But, he adds,"if there is a power in the Christianity which she disowned but which never disowned her, profounder than the farthest reach of fatalism, even Mr. Hardy cannot stand beside her."

Anthony Trollope is credited with a better knowledge of English society life than any other English novelist; Jane Austen and George Eliot both failed of his fidelity, "the one because she was too witty, the other because she was too wise." To an equal degree he surpassed Dickens and Thackeray in the depiction of manners, shunning caricature, sentimentality, and mocking satire. Mr. Howells doubts if in all fiction"there is a lovelier or sweeter conscience story than The Warden." Lily Dale and Mrs. Proudie are the heroines, if we may use the word, who remain most distinct in his mind. The latter is a triumph of complexity: she is not "the type of mere termagant," but the more difficult problem of "the woman who is conscientious as well as arrogant, who means well

to those she most wrongs and outrages."

Mr. Howells does feel Trollope's lack of subtlety compared with greater artists and keener psychologists - the baldness of his photography, a less sympathetic critic would call it. But he has no patience with such criticism as that of Carlyle: that Trollope could never lack for characters so long as there were thirty millions of people in Great Britain, mostly bores. He expresses the fact neatly, we think, when he says of Lily Dale in her hour of trial that we see her soul with its clothes on. "For in the world he (Trollope) deals with," he explains, "the soul as well as the body is clothed, and wears its decorums and conventions as constantly."

VI. THE FORM OF LITERATURE

FORMS OF FICTION

From what has already been said, two facts must be evident: that literature for Mr. Howells is almost synonymous with fiction, and that the classification of works of fiction according to genres is a matter of the least possible interest to him. Accordingly, almost nothing has been said of literature in other than the narrative style, and little need be said about narrative form. But we would put the reader on his guard against hastily accusing Mr. Howells of uncatholicity, by reminding him, in the one case, of our theorist's lofty and all-inclusive conception of the office of the realistic novelist, of what we called a religion of realism, and in the other, of his firm belief that the novelist who would fulfill his exalted function must draw the laws of his art from life and not from the art of others.

Although the artist must not fetter himself by attempting to make his work conform to the outlines of an established design, it does not follow that his novel may be formless. It must have form in the sense of being an artistic entity. Form is the great preservative of literature; through lack of it, such a writer as Walt Whitman "spills and wastes away." If the young American realist must have an example, let him emulate the simplicity, freedom, flexibility, and amplitude of design that characterize the Spanish picaresque novel, for instance, the Lazarillo de Tormes

of Hurtado de Mendoza. "The intrigue of close texture," explains Mr. Howells, "will never suit our conditions, which are so loose, and open, and variable; each man's life among us is a romance of the Spanish model, if it is the life of a man who has risen, as we nearly all have, with many ups and downs."[1] If the great American novel we have heard so much about ever appears, he cannot help thinking it will be built upon the noble lines of Don Quixote.

Although Mr. Howells takes no delight in categories, he recognizes the essential distinction in motive and method between the roman, the nouvelle, and the conte:

"In that dim, subjective region where the aesthetic origins present themselves almost with the authority of inspiration there is nothing clearer than the difference between the short-story motive and the long-story motive."[2]

"The novella must be clearly imagined above all things, for there is no room in it for those felicities of characterization or comment by which the artist of faltering design saves himself in the novel."[2]

The novelette, he characterizes as near the novel in motive, near the short-story in definiteness of form. "In fact, the novel has form in the measure that it approaches the novelette; and some of the most symmetrical modern novels are scarcely more than novelettes, like Turgeniev's Dmitri Rudine, or his Smoke, or Spring Floods."[2]

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[1] My Literary Passions.

[2] Literature and Life (Some Anomalies of the Short Story).

We are rather glad than disappointed that Mr. Howells for one has been content to recognize the distinction without trying to define it. It is a difference that everyone feels clearly, but which has thus far eluded all attempts at formulation into exact laws.

Mr. Howells' page glows with patriotic ardor when he pays tribute to the American writers who have raised our literature to eminence in the art of the short-story. The path to new glories, he feels, lies in the cultivation of the novelette. This "middle magnitude" has possibilities which we have yet to realize, combining as it does the perfection of the short-story and the larger scope of the novel.

ON STYLE.

Mr. Howells' idea of style in literature is consonant with his idea of structure. Just as the form of the novel should be free and flexible, adaptable always to the exact transcription of ordinary events, so the manner of speech should be the ordinary manner of a clear and musical speaker. Since he would not have the form distorted or molded in accord with Stevenson's "one creative and controlling thought," to which every incident and character must contribute; he could not have the style pitched "in unison with this," as the romancer bids. The eternal vigilance against the word that "looks another way," the contriving of patterns and webs of discourse, which for Stevenson makes writing a fine art, appears to Mr. Howells an artificiality with a tendency only less dangerous than the contriving of plots to draw the

artist away from the source of inspiration.

In his boyhood, he played the sedulous ape as sedulously as Stevenson himself; he never loved an author, he tells us, without wishing to write like him. He could not admire even Chaucer without borrowing Chaucer's archaic phrases. At one time he had a craze for the simple Anglo-Saxon words, despising most heartily all long Latin derivatives. "I still like the little word," he remarks, "if it says the thing I want to say as well as the big one, but I honor above all the word that says the thing."[1] "To aim at succinctness and brevity, merely, as some teach, is to practice a kind of quackery almost as offensive as the charlatanry of rhetoric. In either case the life goes out of the subject."[2]

He came to learn that "style is only a man's way of saying a thing,"[3] and that although one may always learn from the masters, it is quite futile to practice talking in their various manners. His advice to the youthful contributor is to "put aside all anxiety about style; that is a thing that will take care of itself; it will be added unto him if he really has something to say."[3]

"If he has not much to say, or if he has nothing to say, perhaps he will try to say it in some other man's way, or to hide his own vacuity with rags of rhetoric and tags and fringes of manner, borrowed from this author and that. He will fancy that in this disguise his work will be more literary, and that there is

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[1] *My Literary Passions.*

[2] *Imaginary Interviews.*

[3] *Literature and Life.*

somehow a quality, a grace, imparted to it which will charm in spite of the inward hollowness. His vain hope would be pitiful if it were not so shameful, but it is destined to suffer defeat at the first glance of the editorial eye.

"If he really has something to say, however, about something he knows and loves, he is in the best possible case to say it well. Still, from time to time he may advantageously call a halt, and consider whether he is saying the thing clearly and simply. If he has a good ear he will say it gracefully and musically; and I would by no means have him aim to say it barely or sparely. It is not so that people talk, who talk well, and literature is only the thought of the writer flowing from the pen instead of the tongue."[1]

In conclusion, Mr. Howells thinks that we grossly overestimate the value of style as a permanent literary quality. He holds no author great or worthy of remembrance because of his manner of speech.[2] Style is something that is added unto a writer,

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[1] _Literature_ _and_ _Life_.

[2] Contrast R. L. Stevenson (_On_ _Style_ _in_ _Literature_): "And, on the other hand, how many do we continue to peruse and reperuse with pleasure whose only merit is elegance of texture? I am tempted to mention Cicero; and since Mr. Anthony Trollope is dead, I will. It is a poor diet for the mind, a very colorless and toothless 'criticism of life;' but we may enjoy the pleasure of a most intricate and dexterous pattern, every stitch a model at once of elegance and of good sense; and the two oranges, even if one of

whether he be the youthful contributor, or Shakespeare, or Tolstoi, or Dante.

them be rotten, kept dancing with inimitable grace."

VII. HOWELLS THE CREATOR

A review of Mr. Howells' work as a novelist is quite beyond the scope of this investigation; but it is fitting that we should close with some recognition of his notable faithfulness to his ideals. It is inevitable that a theorist who is at the same time a prolific practitioner should sometimes expose himself to the charge of inconsistency; and it must be admitted that Mr. Howells has here and there lapsed into the conventions of story writing. He solves life for Florida Vervain (A Foregone Conclusion) in the old manner of marriage, when he had just done the other thing so truly for Kitty Ellison in A Chance Acquaintance; and he has given us in A Woman's Reason a story of romantic separation with the old devices - yes, even to shipwreck and coral island. Nevertheless, it is certain that any disapproval of his work as a whole must challenge not his practice but his theory. Those readers who demand "good stories" must for the most part remain dissatisfied, for he is a recorder of life, not a maker of stories.

Yet it cannot be said that Mr. Howells has altogether satisfied critics schooled in the ways of realism. There is nobility and heroism to be met with in life, yet heroes are absent from his pages. We hear it charged that his silly and narrow-minded heroines are a slander on American womanhood. Then, are there no wicked people in the world? Gertrude Atherton calls Mr. Howells a writer for boarding-school misses. George Moore

found his novels entirely too pretty, a mere dilution of Henry James, whose stories caused him to cry out:[1]

"Why does a woman never leave the house with her lover? Why does a man never kill a man? Why does a man never kill himself? Why is nothing ever accomplished?"

Now, two important aspects of realism have already been mentioned (Chapter IV.) in which Mr. Howells is not in accord with the continental masters. The first of these has regard to his own particular mission as an apostle of the faith, to reveal the significance of the commonplace even to the exclusion of the heroic; the second is in the nature of a dictum limiting the American realist to such realism as is suitable for the perusal of young ladies. Mr. Howells has consecrated his art to the presentation of life, not in its lofty and occasional phases, nor in its depths of wickedness, but in its "habitual moods" of shallowness, unloveliness, and tiresomeness. He has carried to its extreme the recognized principle of realism everywhere that the ordinary level of our existence has its divine meaning as well as the heights and depths of experience.

One is justified in quarreling with Mr. Howells in so far as he would impose a like limitation upon all the craft, that is, in so far as he would deny to American converts to realism the full heritage of their faith; but the worth of his own ideal he has demonstrated beyond all disclaiming. Perhaps another will as realistically show us the loveliness of American women and the

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[1] The Confessions of a Young Man (Impressions and Opinions)

nobility of American men; but we should be eternally grateful that Mr. Howells has had the insight and the power of expression to clear our vision, and to enable us to see in a poetic light the ordinary failings of the men and women whom we most often meet in the course of the day's occupation. Insight, power and grace of expression, to these we must add his unfailing sense of humor, for the truth about our own triviality would have its bitter taste were it not for the geniality and sympathy of the recorder.

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